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DOWN THE  
PROUD STREAM

*By the same Author*

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THE WOODEN PILLOW

DOWN THE  
PROUD STREAM

BY  
CARL FALLAS

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FIRST EDITION

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DOWN THE  
PROUD STREAM

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I

THE barmaid of the Bull Inn began to polish the bar with vigour at half-past seven one fine March morning. Her head was full of light thoughts, chiefly about the young farmers and townsmen who had come in last night. She had thrown open the door to let in the upland fresh air, more than to invite custom; and she had just decided, for the hundredth time in her life, that spilled ale marks were easier to rub off than cider stains.

There were not yet half a dozen people about in Alderlow Market Square.

"May I have a tumbler of hot milk, please? And will you put a teaspoonful of brandy in it? A teaspoonful . . . no more."

This request, so early in the day, caused the barmaid to blink to make sure she was wide awake; her red lips parted, too. But she put down her duster, and poked her head in at the kitchen door with the order, which brought with an echo's speed the kitchen maid's reply:

"A glass of hot *what*?"

"Milk."

And having shouted this convincing word the barmaid turned to address the youth with the pale face who had come in from the High Street. "Hadn't you better have a proper half-measure of brandy? We don't serve it by the teaspoon." She looked at him inquisitively, wondering what had brought him into the bar just now in such restless haste. He was about eighteen years old.

"No; a spoonful." He shook his head firmly. "More



would keep me awake. The doctor said so. I want a bed, too ; a room for two hours. Until the bus goes."

The girl dropped her duster again.

"Bus ?"

With rising concern he asked her : "Isn't there a bus to Barns Lea ?"

"There is the coach at ten."

"Then please wake me at half-past nine. I must not miss it. Be sure to do so. Will you ?"

"Polly will," said the barmaid. "She is the chamber-maid. Here, Polly——" to a plump girl who had looked into the bar from the kitchen, to see who could be wanting brandy and milk at this hour. "Polly, this customer wants a room for two hours. He's to be wakened to catch the coach. He wants to go to bed. You'd better take him. Ah! Here comes Zaida with his hot milk. Wait——" measuring out the brandy into a teaspoon.

Polly asked with a twinkle : "Is that his medicine ?"

The barmaid began to laugh.

All three girls were laughing at this pallid boy with the rumpled black hair and slender figure of middle height. He began to laugh with them. He felt he would like to cancel his room and stay down here with them. Then he thought that very soon, perhaps they would all be gone about their business. They were three buxom girls ; he had never seen three healthier girls. . . The barmaid said warningly that his milk was too hot to drink yet, and she asked :

"What is the matter with you ?"

He took a step back from the bar as if to walk away from the question.

"I am not ill now—but I have been ill. Otherwise," he went on with his answer lamely, seeing the girl's face break into smiles again, "I'm as well——"

"As me ?" she asked.

"As me," the kitchenmaid took up, tapping her full round breast.

"And what be wrong with me ?" the chamber-maid asked. "Come along ; I'll tuck you in bed myself."

He went with her ; she carried his glass of milk before him into a large bedroom, and put it down on the chimney-piece.

"There, it'll be cooled by the time you are undressed. What is your name ?"

"Rolf," he said. "Yours is Polly, isn't it ?"

She nodded, standing still in the middle of the room ; and he went over to the fireplace and took a sip of milk. She asked why he was going to bed before breakfast. He told her he had been travelling all night from the north. Then she went out, joking with him from the doorway.

"If the brandy makes you tipsy and you can't get into bed call me—Polly. Polly—not Annie—nor Zaida."

Gravely he assured her that he did not intend to drink his milk until he was in bed. And when Polly went downstairs she informed the barmaid, who had resumed her work, that she was sure the new guest must be very ill.

"Then let's hope he doesn't die on our hands, before coach-time." Annie shook out her duster, making it crack like a whip.

Zaida the kitchen-maid joined in broadly :

"I reckon 'e've never put an arm round a maid's waist in 'is life. Did you see'm look at Annie ?"

"What if he did ?" the barmaid challenged.

"He looked as if he'd like to eat you."

Annie affected a weary gesture, raising her dark brows toward the girl who had returned from the bedroom.

"Why don't you pop in beside him before coach-time, Polly ?"

"I wouldn't refuse to cuddle him if he asked me," came the reply.

"Pity," Zaida said slyly, "that I didn't think to put an egg in with his brandy."

"I declare," Polly retorted, "he'd be a deal nicer'n some o' they boys of this town. . . The cheek of the blacksmith's lad! 'Twas he brought that new iron fitting for the back door. He threw it down in the porch, gripped my leg as I might be a foal he was to shoe, and said: 'Fine bit of calf, miss. 'Twill make good dumplings some day.'"

The other two girls gave sidelong glances at each other.

"Was that why you chased him into the barn?"

"We thought you were never coming out."

Polly grew scarlet, then covered her confusion with a burst of laughter.

"He was stronger than I expected," she said.

"What," Zaida asked, "do you expect from a blacksmith's lad?"

## II

**R**OLF spent the greater part of his first day at Barns Lea fast asleep. He had come to spend the summer here with an elderly couple named Nolan, at their pleasant house near the entrance to the village. Its mistress, a wakeful little woman, was surprised that Rolf could sleep so deeply in broad daylight, and she said to her husband :

"If he carries on like that, he will sleep his brains away. No wonder he is pale. He ought to be up and in the garden. A bedroom is all right at night, but it is a stuffy place by day."

The house stood in a stony court-yard ; it faced away from the road, and its windows—always thrown open—looked out upon a garden sloping down to fields and a stream, and across the valley to climbing pastures rich with lush grass.

When Rolf got up in the evening Peter Nolan, who was a market gardener, regarded him from head to foot humorously. If the lad performed this trick every day, he said, there would be no need to cook for him. Next day he took him up to his allotment, five minutes' walk beyond the last house in the village, which was the home of his brother Alfred. The white road between the two houses was a straggling mile long, hardly anywhere wider than a good-sized lane. Rolf offered to wheel the big barrow of tools ; then he suggested that at least they should take turns.

Mr. Nolan joked him familiarly.

"S'pose you fell down, Rolf. I should have to put you in the barrow along with the fork and spade."

But after they had passed his brother's house he gave him

the barrow. This was uphill, but not far. Rolf noticed a good many bees among the primroses in the hedges ; they were busy in the sunshine, which was bright but not yet very warm.

Mr. Nolan told him they were Alfired's bees.

"We will look in at his place," he said, "on the way back at midday."

MR. NOLAN showed Rolf how to plant asparagus roots in a row, and was so pleased by his pupil's progress that he agreed to let him do the rest of this new long row alone. Nobody could have persuaded him to believe, he said, that a young fellow from a town would shape so well. They had been kneeling together on some empty sacks beside the furrow, but the gardener rose triumphantly to his feet. Now he could get on with the other two rows himself. Later on, they would see which row produced the most asparagus sticks.

"I will write to 'ee at home, and tell 'ee," Nolan said.

With disappointment Rolf learned that this would not be for at least three seasons. These new roots would then bear for a dozen years or more. With one hand he held an asparagus cone upright in the furrow, carefully spreading out the long roots like the legs of a spider. Mr. Nolan was enjoying a pinch of snuff ; some of it fell on his tuft of grey beard, which was like fine wire, bronzed in the middle. He took out a big drab handkerchief, and gave such a snort into it that a horse on the other side of the hedge started away at a gallop across the field. Rolf leapt to his feet and watched the animal career round the field. It tore back to the spot where it had set off, pulling up with a thudding of feet on the turf ; it tossed up its head to stare at them over the shrub hedge.

The asparagus grower had not stirred, and there was still an expression of sweet surprise on his face when he spoke, in a subdued voice.

"I never zee'd un there. 'Tis all times my belief that a terrified stallion be as trout lesome as an angry bull."

"Do you think he may jump the hedge, Mr. Nolan?"

"If I were to sneeze at un again, I dare say. Next time I want a pinch of snuff I'll go down below into the rhubarb field."

The stallion was cropping the grass again, occasionally swishing his long tail. Once more the creature threw up his head, nostrils dilated, as if sensing something faintly on the keen air. A tender whinny, remote but clear, came from one of the farther fields. The stallion swung round with flying heels and bounded away to the opposite fence, which grew on the top of a high and solid earthen ridge; he reared upright, pounding a tattoo on the mound with impatient forehooves. On the right, in the corner, a farm lad appeared through a gate he had just opened, and whistled a call to the frenzied creature, twice:

"Phe-ew! Phe-ew!"

Rolf watched the great horse gallop through on the wind.

"The boy doesn't seem to be afraid of him, Mr. Nolan. I suppose the horse knows him pretty well?"

The gardener had picked up a large basket and turned away; it was full of asparagus cones he was about to space out, evenly, along the second furrow. His back to Rolf, he replied amiably: "I reckon he does. I reckon that isn't the first time the lad has fetched him. You heard the mare down over at the stable-yard, I s'pose?"

"Yes, I heard it, Mr. Nolan. Of course I heard it. But to me it was just another horse."

"And to the horse it was just another mare."

Low sounds of amusement at his own sally came from Nolan's stooping figure; Rolf felt his conscience prick him for

not joining in these chuckles of fun. He watched Nolan go on with his basket to the far end of the furrow.

Just then the Alderlow coach came up the road. Ascending the gentle rise that bounded the allotment the four horses had been given their head, after taking it easy through the village mile. Rolf wondered whether the driver would know him again in his different clothes. The coach went by with a grand swaying. The jovial old fellow with a handful of reins raised aloft his tall whip in salute. He turned his weathered face and shouted a greeting which Rolf nearly lost in the clatter of the galloping team :

"So that's where you are ? A fine life !"

Inside the coach there were few passengers, and on top, none ; the seat next to the driver was empty today. For one hallucinatory second Rolf saw his own ghostly figure still sitting in the empty seat. . . The coach went over the crest with a grinding of brakes. Next there came back the notes of the posting horn, recalling yesterday's scene in the market square. Outside the Bull Inn the postillion had sounded a call, brakes were released, the coachman had sent a light curling flip of his lash to reach the ears of the dozing leaders. Then at the last moment a little old woman in a poke bonnet had run out of a cottage garden with a parcel to be carried to Monks Vale—the end of the coach stage, round by the high cliff road bordering the downs.

Rolf stood quite still, one foot in the asparagus furrow, until the sound of the horses' feet died away over the crest.

He was thinking of Polly, of Annie and Zaida, jostling one another in the inn porch as they called out good-bye, while the coachman, pointing to them with his whip, had cried in a voice that must have been heard all over the square :

"What ! Be these your sweethearts ? All three ?"

### III

IN adolescence youth is prone to look back upon its littler self, the child it once was, with a guarded eye. That minute personality could not have been whole. It was a fragment, not always the same, and is identified by a portrait, an incidental memory, stories that are told . . . at best a quaint mosaic. Only to the very old, those fond weavers, is given the dubious art to make of their childhood a wonderful tapestry.

Among the people in the town where Rolf was born woodland life, the life of the dales and the rivers, must have long been forgotten. Such pastoral or rural scenes as there were, included a mere scattering of fields and their few scrub hedge borders. Until his visit to Barns he had never seen, that he could remember, a bull in its own meadow. One grand fellow, the real thing, no doubt, stood out memorably in far-off days: it wore a ring in its nose and was led along the road by a fat man with a face as red as a butcher's; a second man, who looked like a tramp and carried a ridiculously small stick, marching behind with a scruffy but self-important dog.

"Isn't he self-important?"

Rolf's mother had put this question with such intimate and peculiar pride that her younger son, just out of frocks and into knee pants, felt the animal was theirs.

They lived in a house in the middle of a long row, opposite another row exactly as long. Once every week, always, for some obscure reason, on a Saturday, a horned beast, bull or cow—Rolf's brother was positive it was a bull, inclined to



madness—used to appear in the field at the end of the street, poke its scared and scaring face over the scrub fence, and bellow without end.

“What must we do if it breaks loose?”

Always the same question, and the same inevitable answer :

“I’ve told you before ; I will leave the front door open. But don’t use it unless the bull”—their mother also called it a bull—“gets through the hedge. I’ve only just cleaned the steps and scrubbed out the porch. Rolf can come in by the front way, but you”—to his brother two years older—“are bigger and can run faster, and must hurry round to the back.”

Open door of humiliation.

“Can’t *he* come in the front way, too?”

“No, I have cleaned the steps.”

“Then can I run round with him to the back?”

At last the answer was yes, marking a red-letter day ; and Rolf, who was then rather bow-legged, felt as important as the scruffy sheep-dog.

At the age of eight Rolf bestowed his first caresses upon a girl of seven. It was a most precipitate courtship. Few of its details survived for very long as a recollection—perhaps there never were many—but the girl, and also the setting, remained clear enough. She had golden hair and long eyelashes somewhat darker than her hair, and her name was Una ; there were eleven other scholars at the mixed school where they met. For the first lesson Rolf had been placed, considerably, next to a stately girl twelve years old, the tallest in the school. Her jet-black hair was brushed very smooth, and she had fine hands with long and elegant fingers. She was making a drawing on a splendid sheet of rough paper, which the boy could not help but look at covetously. His own task was to learn a hymn—as a test of memory.

The girl was drawing the wall on the opposite side of the street, with the tree that appeared above it. Rolf began to follow her glances across the road, and return with her to the picture.

At last he said quite loudly :

"Do not forget the end of the big branch on the left ; it is poking into the next tree."

Whereupon the other scholars, after hiding their amusement so long, laughed outright.

"Hush ! Children, you make me ashamed . . ." came the rebuke, in the shocked and faded voice of Mrs. Eve. "And you, Rolf, please allow Winifred to get on with her drawing. Do not forget you are learning a hymn. We shall be singing it presently." How ashamed she looked, this schoolmistress, who wore self-respect like a cloak, her spectacles not quite straight on her nose, knitting in her old rocking-chair, over in the corner by the fire !

The solitary school-desk was long and narrow ; it was filled by the scholars on both sides ; it reached all across the floor of that small and shabby parlour, from the wall on the left of the door into the bay window on the other side, where Rolf was seated next to Winifred. From the moment he was first ushered into the room everyone had wanted to laugh.

Good-humouredly he had wondered why.

They had looked up from their slates as he entered ; some had been amused by his name, by the scraggy whip he had brought to school, the lump in front of his right thigh (apparently a large top in the pocket) ; they had all stared at his big close-cropped head, his pale face emerging (like a weedy cauliflower) above his deep white collar, and at his bow-legs ; wondering, on their part, what on earth he had to smile at.

UNA was the discovery of playtime.

For the first five of the twenty minutes' break Rolf lashed his top, which went well, humming with a comforting sound. Without any exchange of words a boy put out his hand for the whip, and proceeded to thrash the top with masterly art, until, perilously, it lay almost over on its side in its tuneful gyrations ; then he coaxed it with lighter cuts, and it kept its point on the paved side-walk, purring and purring again : never had a top spun so.

After a while this boy said darkly : "Be careful . . ."

Of what must Rolf be careful ?

The mysterious warning was spoken past him, as if addressed to the air. Instinctively he looked up ; in the corner of the bay-window sat Mrs. Eve, knitting.

"Prying old bitch," said his companion, surveying the street, and he yawned loudly, as Rolf had sometimes heard his father yawn at night on the other side of the bedroom wall.

"You know what you promised, Stanley !"

This was said in a girl's voice from behind, with even, maidenly reproof. Rolf's mentor of the class-room had joined them, turning up from nowhere. The complacent Stanley laughed ; Winifred's elderly deprecation meant nothing to him, though he must have made her some promise : Rolf never learned what it was. Stanley addressed her as Winnie darling. But she was not his darling ; Rolf could see that by her affronted dignity when she walked off, smoothing her plastered hair, after his next words :

"Mother must have worn out the hair brush, almost, this morning, my pet."

The bold Stanley was leaving at the end of the week : he was at the age limit for Mrs. Eve's school—nine for boys, twelve for girls. He was going to a decent school, he said—

all boys. His father had told him it would knock the corners off him.

"Corners!"

He would knock them off *it*.

Did he mean the brickwork corners? He had broad hips and shoulders and a deep chest, in which he made assertive stertorous noises—like a giant with, Rolf thought, a rattle under his waistcoat.

That family, his mother told him in the evening, was the same all through . . . chests! Thank Heaven her boy hadn't got a chest! Rolf was quite proud: he hadn't got a chest. He kept the talk going on Stanley, his prowess, the big school he was going to; his prospects of getting rid of his chest. It buried his thoughts of Una out of family sight. It kept Una safe in his own breast.

At midnight his mother turned out his bedroom gas-jet, drew up the old slatted blind with a faint rattle, and went out on tiptoe.

Her son promptly muttered in his sleep:

*"I didn't, Mrs. Eve."*

And he woke up.

The schoolmistress, more shocked even than when the others had laughed at him, had entered the class-room (in this waking dream) and given a sharp triple rap with her cane on the arm of her rocking-chair.

"Now for it," he distinctly heard Stanley say.

"No, Mrs. Eve," said Una. "He tried to, but missed. It was only on my hair. His mouth didn't touch my cheek—truthfully."

In the boy's dream Mrs. Eve, a pair of eyes behind her window-pane, appeared to be fully aware of his capture of Una at the end of the playtime, in the general flight and pur-

suit along the street. For she went on, before the whole school :

"In the corner, between two bay-windows . . ." and then could speak no more for very shame.

Rolf lay still in bed. The sensation and flavour of Una's hair in his mouth and nostrils had vanished. Nor did he now dwell upon this incident of the morning's playtime as, indeed, it had happened unseen by Mrs. Eva — Una with her tight fists crossed downward, elbows raised to protect her face, hot with speed and laughter.

He was concerned with something else altogether.

Quite still, he lay, listening for the repetition of a sound : merely the noise made, though he did not know it, by his mother when she had closed his bedroom door. By a flight of phantasy he identified and also located the sound. It was the Secret Sharer, who lodged permanently under his bed ; the Unknown, who stayed with him in every wakeful hour of unlighted night. This sharer of his bedroom used to be Christ in a slouch hat ; but now it was something impersonal, shapeless, and endowed with infinite powers of touch. One of its earliest forms had been assumed by a hidden cobweb which, emerging from its secret lair, took the guise of a misshapen dwarf and, disturbingly, shook hands with him.

THE tramp of feet at morning. . .

Clog-ironed feet at five o'clock on the flags below Rolf's window. Scraps of greeting sung out in winter before dawn, from the night shift coming away from the mill to the day shift going on.

"Hey, mate, wor it warm i' bed ? I'm goin' where tha's come from. . . What ! Dunna tell me tha's had bacon 'n' eggs for breakfast. Tha 'asna wshed t'sleep out'n thi eyes . . ."

"Ay, lass, if I worked in't same shift as thee I'd gi' thee summat to think on. Ah'll meet thee on t'croft any neet tha likes. But tha munna bring thi mother wi' thee. An' we shanna need a lamp to see what we're abaht."

Tramp ! Tramp ! The laughter and jocular insults of men in coloured mufflers and check caps, women clutching shawls at their necks with one hand ; endless feet on the stone pavement, to and from the mill with the sky-high chimney stack.

Because this mill had the tallest chimney he had ever seen, Rolf used to hope that some day he might work there ; as what, he had no idea, and when at thirteen he entered the mill-owner's private office his ambition had taken a new turn. He wanted to become a philosopher ; but this he kept a secret, undecided, so far, whether to follow in the steps of Plato, Carlyle, or Emerson. Of these three he leaned to the second, because Carlyle had been disappointed in love by a girl with a beautiful name : Margaret Gordon. If it had been Rolf's fortune to know Margaret and his grief to have been rejected by her, he would have borne it nobly—since to bear things nobly was the true attribute of a philosopher. Moreover, Carlyle's favourite quotation happened to be the same as his own :

'Tis thus at the roaring loom of Time I ply  
And weave for God the garment thou seest Him by.

True, Rolf had no urgent wish to weave garments for the Almighty, but it was grand to think of plying at the roaring loom of Time ; a high-sounding task at, surely, no ordinary loom !

"Boy," the mill-owner addressed him. "I wish your boots didn't squeak so."

Rolf explained, with a friendly air, that his boots were new. "The squeak," he assured the great man, "will soon wear off. Mother said ——"

"Come, come, don't bring your mother into the affairs of the mill. I daresay she's a good woman in her own sphere."

"Very!"

Rolf said this in a low, unintrusive tone, wagging his head sideways to endorse the single word. And, at the table in the corner, where he had been told to sit, he began an under-his-breath incantation, directed at the fat, fleshy, bold figure at the immense desk in the middle of this enormous room: "She said she knew you'd be annoyed. She said she knew you'd be ——"

The great man had become a figure of evil.

"Boy, run and order me a cab."

"—annoyed"—Rolf, who was startled, finished his sentence audibly.

"And on your way back," went on the mill-owner, "call in at the hairdresser's." He wanted the hairdresser half an hour before the cab.

But Rolf on his errand, preoccupied perhaps with his squeaking boots, or as likely as not with Carlyle's love-affair, forgot to call in at the barber's shop—as he explained to his mother at home in the evening, when this first day's work was done.

What excuse, she inquired, did he make?

That he had completely forgotten!

And what did the mill-owner say?

That he was always to be frank. If he was frank, he would *get on*. And would he—the mill-owner had then wanted to know—like to go into the weaving sheds?

Long afterwards Rolf remembered that startling question and the cunning manner in which it was asked:

"Wouldn't you like to become a weaver?"

As if, it seemed, the mill-owner, who had large and bloated cheeks, each one as big as a separate face, had probed to his inmost secret: 'Tis thus at the roaring loom——' What

kind of a love-affair could such a man possibly have had, ever ?

Rolf's office errands took him to a long, low building which struck him, on his first visit, as a whole roofed-in town of noisy, jocular women. Women and girls in hundreds at long, long tables. What their task was he could not tell and dared not look to see, but the girls cried out in their amusement and delight as he came marching, manfully, down the long centre avenue.

"Look at him ! *My word !*"

"If I catch you, little man, *you'll* know about it !"

What was the suitable reply to make ? There must be something ; but he could not think of it.

"Shut up, Tilly, tha's makin' t' poor lad ashamed !" he heard one girl shout to her workmate, and Rolf would have liked to turn round, laugh with easy familiarity, and explain :

"No, I'm not ashamed ; I'm only ——"

Only what ?

ONCE in a while he came across old schoolmates, working youths for whom, also, the separation from old days and associations had come. Lively encounters ! Bravadoes, stories of new-found happiness ! Never did one of them admit a wish to be back at school. Not likely !

He met Stanley.

Stanley was going on to a farm.

"You should see my pedigree bull."

"What ! You've got a bull, your own ?"

"Well, the family's. We've taken it over, with the farm, you see. . . What are you doing at the mill, weaving ?"

Rolf's mind worked swiftly ; it had to, in the presence of his old friend, whose family treasures included a bull.

"Ever spin tops now ?" he asked suddenly, to gain time.

"Tops ?" Stanley had forgotten the meaning of tops. "Oh,



*tops !*" He made a gay gesture with his arm as if whipping an imaginary top. "This sort of thing, eh ?"

Rolf grinned. Then he admitted : "I may do a bit of weaving, first" — the last word emphasised.

"*First ?*"

"Yes, then I think we are going abroad."

"Heck ! Where to ?"

"Africa, unless we change our minds."

"Africa ! Whatever for ?"

"Hunting and that. Big game."

Stanley's eyes lit up. "But what about horses — and pack mules ? You'll need them."

"Oh," said Rolf, "we shall have them all right. We are getting the first one very soon." This was a false step.

"Heck ! Gee ! Can you ride ?"

"No," said Rolf, recovering his breathless ground. "That's why we're getting the first horse by itself. I shall learn on *it*."

"Liar !" Stanley had recovered his ground too. But he had enjoyed the humbug.

"Well, so long, Rolly," he said kindly.

"So long, Stan," said Rolf. At any rate he had kept secret his intention to become a philosopher. He turned once, to wave, when they were about two hundred yards apart. Stanley had turned too, and bellowed something and swung his arm in a wide sweep as if he were whipping a top.

Rolf nearly wept.

Stanley, he reflected, must have got rid of his chest. Or perhaps he was going on a farm because of it. Pedigree bull ! How splendid it would be to join Stanley on his farm, in partnership. On the other hand . . . farming and philosophy might not go well together. No ; he would stick to his choice.

More firmly decided than ever on this last point, he crossed the road and was nearly run down by a hansom cab.

"Bow-legged little bastard !" a voice roared over the top of the horse's ears as the animal, jerked back by the driver, sat down on its haunches. The blue-eyed cabman also inquired luridly why he didn't look where he was going. Rolf, leaping for his life, had never seen such an angry face as the cabman's, spluttering at him round his horse's head—which was still pretty high in the air. Perhaps it was the blue of the whole face which threw up the blue of the man's eyes. He was a most blue-eyed cabman——

So Rolf told his mother, who said perhaps the cabman was drunk. But really, Rolf *must* be more careful. He made her alarmed for him. She never knew he was safe until she saw his face at the door.

Oh, come, mother ! Hadn't he been coming home safely all these years ?

That might be ; but he dreamed so. And the roads, with all those horses, were not the places for dreaming. . .

There the matter, openly, rested.

But in private Rolf debated it further ; possibly as a test of logic for the philosophic career that lay ahead.

"Cabby——" he rehearsed what he felt prepared to tell the blue-eyed driver if ever they met again (perhaps *cabman* would sound better). "Cabman, I am sorry I got in your way in that careless manner, the other day."

"That's all right, young gent," the reply would come. "It's all in the day's work !"

"Nevertheless, I apologise. As to what you said about my legs, I assure you they are nothing like so bowed as they were five years ago. I can prove it by a photograph taken then. Look, now, at this leg, the right one——" straightening it out for the cabman to gaze at, to feel at the firm, thick knee, the splendid calf—"That's with football. I used to keep goal, you know. And this one"—holding up the left leg—"is

hardly bowed at all. It is only when I put my heels together, as you see, that the arch, or bow, is noticeable."

"That's all right, my lad"—the cabman might say here. "As fine a pair o' legs as ever I set eyes on. All you need do now——"

Rolf's secret sense of humour could be wildly capricious. It was apt to side-track his thoughts into strange grooves, so that he wanted to laugh hysterically.

"—is," the jolly cabman would proceed, now in magnificent spirits, "to tie a good piece of rope round your two knees and pull like hell."

Which Rolf would accept in good part, and they would then take leave of each other with a hearty handshake, marking their mutual good will. . .

But wait a moment.

There was one other little point :

"Oh, and cabman ; I'm not a bastard. William the Conqueror was a bastard, and so, I understand, was Leonardo da Vinci. You know, the great Italian artist. But *I'm* not."

"That's all right. I can see that now . . ." with complete assurance from that blue-eyed man.

OF Leonardo, Rolf knew next to nothing ; but with the legend of William he was familiar. How the Conqueror's father, on his way to the wars, or at any rate going somewhere, had met a beautiful girl hanging clothes out to dry on a line. Had seen her and had loved her—William being the gallant, the prodigious, the historic fruit of their love.

#### IV

LOVE, as Rolf conceived it then, had only one possible scar — rejection, which was due, invariably, to some maddening interference by the beloved's family. But once that barrier was scaled the lovers entered into gardens of felicity, could yield to their deep emotions and bask in a meridian sunlight.

Even the scar of rejection had its anodyne.

For the rejected lover there was always the outlet of high and romantic endeavour. One became a philosopher ; or, failing that, a man of letters, a great musical composer, a hermit. If the last were chosen, and no hermitage was available, one might enter a monastery.

About love's physical aspects he was somewhat vague. Whatever they were, they were incidentals ; no more. They were not easy to reconcile with beauty—above all, identify with beautiful and refined women. Somewhat farther back, in his early school-days, he had made a mental selection of those women who had most engaged his fancy—by their voices, charm of feature, some turn of grace as in a movement or a gesture, or by habitual kindness. He had looked into their faces to see what he could read there.

Nothing.

In their expressions was no key ; each one of them seemed above suspicion. Yet some of them were mothers, for their children were his playmates. True, upon the faces of girls of seventeen—and even twenty and more—he fancied he could detect the unquestioned bloom of the vestal ; but that accorded with the evidence. They were not married. Peaches bore

the same kind of bloom, and very beautiful grapes, as he had seen in the best fruit stores. . .

By the time he had reached his middle teens Rolf's heart was like a sea that is ready to cast its fulness upon any shore.

All along he had lived his life as it were in two worlds, the world of everyday and the world within himself, into which so easily he had always been able to withdraw. But gradual changes in the world of everyday had made it seem no longer the same. Above all, the mates of his younger boyhood were scattered! As to the other, his private world . . . no longer could he muse there, its interior had ceased to be his sanctuary, his secure and hospitable retreat. Uninvited guests were there . . . nymphs of hitherto unimagined beauty. In swift and wanton secrecy they came, shading their limbs, hiding soft breasts with lovely hair; creatures with slender waists and cool, audacious arms. They would teach him, this philosopher! They would reveal to him, even while he slept, the mysteries of the gardens of felicity. Ask it or not, their raptures should be his, for ever without end, though his soul turn to gall and he wither like a sapless tree!

Perhaps this was a caprice of Venus, her revenge because he had assigned, unwittingly, a limit to her powers of evil, impugning her gift of scars. . .

About this time Rolf fell in love.

It was a passion which gave direction to his outlook, and in that way somewhat simplified it. To the girl his youthful devotion must have been startling, and after his first kiss—an eager, blundered affair which she made some pretence of eluding—she withheld herself no longer.

She had long been lightly aware of his attachment.

Such interest as he had failed to conceal she was able, in her grown-up feminine way, to regard indifferently, or with amusement that fell short of disdain. Her extra two years

gave her that privilege. She had first perceived the simple evidence of his affection in an averted glance : he dared not look at her. But of one aspect she could not be aware—that for Rolf this affinity marked the end of a timeless phase wherein she, a remote figure, had appeared to stand at the head of a far vista along which he could not advance one step.

Now, in their place of solitude, he stood near her.

They were within the shadow of a stout old wall of massive stone blocks, encircling an immense garden fallen into decay ; a huge tree had long ago forced its way up through the wall, recking nothing of its mortared granite, and a sheltered corner was formed. Rolf still felt on his lips the touch of her veil, through which he had kissed her ; it was warm and damp with her breath, which in the cold had condensed on it in a milky odour, and mingled with the scent of the earth after rain. His kiss had barely reached her. It had almost gone by her cheek at a tangent into the darkness ; and he faced her without speaking or stirring to repeat it, though it was easy to have done so.

“So that, so *that*,” he told himself, “is what it is”—the mortal contact of a kiss, which his defeated senses strove to grasp again, as if it were the only one and kisses did not feed on kisses.

The girl made no attempt to bridge the gap of silence between them. She was looking down at her feet, and poked the ferrule of her long umbrella into the soft gravel. Her other hand had gone up to her face, what doing, Rolf could not see. She presented all the top of her hat, an offering unacceptable as the total eclipse of some heavenly body, a large, oblique, grey disc in the darkness, behind which she was hidden to the chin. Cocked gaily at an angle on her abundant hair, the hat must have fallen from its perch if not secured there by the two huge pins stuck through its flattish crown.

He spoke her name, twice, without getting any response. To his own ears his voice sounded like an echo, the external echo of what he had been saying within himself from the moment they had paused here.

But he tried again, repeating her name :

"Anna !"

Something was stroking his face, tickling it lightly as the blown strand of a spider, and he gave a little start ; but it was only the end of the ostrich feather that curled upward round the crown of Anna's hat, and he jerked his face sharply to one side, drawing in his chin, looking at the tip of the feather out of the corner of his eye—at the moment, precisely, that she spoke.

"I believe," said Anna in a singularly small voice of dubious concern; "you have torn a hole in my veil . . ."

Rolf sought her hand round the brim of her hat. In its tight kid glove it felt warm, slight and compact ; and she let it rest in his. But she moved it until he felt his knuckles touch her face—which was bare.

She had raised her veil to the level of her brow.

Rolf laid each cheek in turn next to hers, on one side of Anna's face and then the other. His mouth passed with exquisite curiosity from place to place, and at last paused on her lips. He seemed as if he did not know what to do with his arms, which he put round her neck, then round her body, and at last, one arm round her neck and the other round her body. Then he unclasped her and put each hand separately on either side of her waist, compressing it gently, inquisitively, to feel its outline, its shape. Her shape ! Her shape ! He replaced his one arm round her neck and the other round her waist, and put his cheek next to hers again, as if that were its lasting place of repose.

Except once, he did not move for a long time ; this was to bring his chest more directly opposite to her breasts, and there to exert the gentlest pressure. It was with her cheeks and her breasts he seemed most concerned.

She could feel his heart bounding.

Anna's began to thump too, wildly.

Until this moment his cheeks had been warmer than hers ; now, compared with her own, they were cool.

Anna turned her face slowly until their lips touched, and put her mouth firmly against Rolf's . . . conscious, as she did so, of the cool night air on the cheek she had just exposed. . .

Then they moved away out of the shadows.

Sometimes at the end of evenings passed like this they were elated, as if an intoxicant coursed through their veins, making them laugh and talk as they withdrew from the aged tree and the wall of the old and decayed garden. Or, hardly speaking, they would make their way homewards as if they had drunk of some beguiling drug, and cling together until the last moment of parting, turning their faces toward the place they had come from — still lingering there in spirit.

How then, at last, did disenchantment come ? It would have been hard for either of them to tell. One evening Rolf proposed, acceptably to Anna, that they should not meet again.

"If you think it is better ; if you have made up your mind" — said Anna, and stopped, hanging on to his words for proof of what she knew. "Nay ; do not bother to kiss me any more . . ." she said. And as Rolf made no attempt to do so, but laid his cheek next to hers, as on their first evening together, she clung to him ; and her tearless relief turned to a flood of weeping. They mingled their tears, determined to part, terribly weary of each other, in the spirit as in the flesh.



Piteously weeping over a love that was dead, like two who share a lost illusion they offered comfort to each other, embracing and embracing, unable to separate.

Not a word of reproach was uttered.

Had they been older they could not, in that mood, have parted.

## V

IN Alfred Nolan's apiary there were ninety-three hives of bees. They were in orderly horizontal rows, like detached suburban houses. Besides these full hives there were ten that were empty, lately put in place, like newly-erected dwellings awaiting tenants. Eight rows of hives made up this garden suburb of bees. From each of the seven avenues you could walk out to the left on to a path about six feet wide. Beyond the path was a fine orchard, closely grown but not very large. Poultry were plentiful there, eternally scratching for grit in the shade of the trees and enriching the soil with their droppings. This central path came down by the gable end of the house, some forty feet to the left of the kitchen windows, and completely bisected the garden; it sloped in a straight line from a narrow gate, tall as the front hedge in which it was built, down to the lower fence.

Last summer the bees had produced a ton of honey.

You quickly became aware of the presence of the bees in vast numbers if you went through Barns on a sunny day. In their direct and speedy purpose, outward to the clover fields or some blossoming hedge or garden, or homeward stuffed with honey, legs clogged with pollen, they crossed over the road in opposite directions, ceaselessly. Sometimes they appeared in spiral clouds, dark and circling clouds, uncertain of their immediate destination. This was when—having multiplied and grown restless in the dense hives—they emerged as a complete brood and were striving to swarm, to bunch even in the air, upon the flying queen.

In the days of Alfred Nolan's grandfather, who first set up

this apiary with a few old-fashioned hives, the mail-coach itself had been held up by a swarm. Legend had since embellished the episode ; and to this day it was told how a great swarm had tried to settle on the muzzle of the leading horse. Luckily the coachman happened to be something of a bee-keeper himself. Pulling up his team, he warned all the passengers outside to seek refuge inside—which they did pell-mell, contrary to his cautionary plea that they should move without bustle—and he then coolly went over to the leader's head and coaxed the bees away.

A more verifiable story, however, was told of a comparatively recent swarm. Its hero was a donkey, the squire's own, and Alfred Nolan vouched for its truthfulness. A roving swarm chose the tail of this particular ass during its blissful enjoyment of a bed of thistles. The animal quivered not a muscle at the hum of their approach. Across hedge and ditch the bee-keeper had raced in pursuit of his swarm, anxious not to lose it ; and he declared afterwards to the squire that his pet did not even look up—until too late.

To which its master retorted, icily :

"Why should it, among its own thistles ? This is going to cost you something, Nolan."

The bee-keeper protested.

"I can't buy your ass a new rump, squire. Besides, it will most likely recover, it is still full of go."

"Full of go ! Man, it has kicked the stable door through and bitten my head groom. You should see its ——"

"I've seen it, squire. It looks as pimply ——" Disrespectfully, the bee-keeper was on the point of pursuing the comparison too far, but he pulled up in time, and besought of the offended man (his ground landlord) a meed of patience. If the squire would only get his groom to rub the donkey's pos-

terior with washing blue (an assured remedy for bee stings) and wait —

"Bee-keeper," fired back the squire, "I would as soon dolly-blue my own backside as ask any groom to tackle that brute in the vicious temper those bees have thrown him into. Go and try it for yourself."

The squire swore. He laughed scornfully at the very idea of it. And when Nolan inquired the victim's whereabouts he was told explosively :

"Back on his bed of thistles."

At this they laughed together, squire and bee-keeper. The former, restored to good humour, agreed to have the animal caught—lassoed if need be—hobbled and made to submit to treatment.

Before nightfall this was done.

The donkey's entire rear half was thoroughly blued, and after four or five days it recovered.

\* \* \* \*

A MAN of manifold activities, the bee-keeper wore a perpetual air of being brimful of absorbing interests. Besides keeping bees he was a shoemaker, and he also bred prize poultry. Withal, when nothing whatever required him he could move with an appearance of urgency from one indefinite preoccupation to another.

In winter he used to attend church regularly, and through the summer except in May and June. In these two months he was to be seen in his pew only on thoroughly dull Sunday mornings. Even so, were the sun to streak through the south window of the church ever so dimly, he would jump up and hurry off home, two long miles, as if he had just been told that his house was on fire.

The rector acknowledged this to be quite proper. But he often wished that Nolan would retreat down the aisle with rather less ostentation. Whereas Alfred felt that any other kind of departure—a sidelong movement along the aisle, say—would seem as if he were going out because of some private bodily discomfort.

“Or as if,” he explained to his pastor with a sly dig, “I had become bored with the service !”

“But, bee-keeper, need you keep your eyes turned up to the south window all through my sermon ?”

“Parson,” was the answer, “I do that because I’m waiting for the clouds to break.” An ambiguous reply which the minister—whose own humour was rarely broadcast among his flock, being rather kept for the privacy of his study, or allowed to blossom over a glass of port with the squire—let pass without comment.

To Alfred, as churchwarden, fell the duty of taking round the offertory box. This was a task ordinarily performed by his fellow-wardens in silent gravity, hands clasped behind their backs, while the box went from hand to hand, and the congregation sang. But Alfred had a magnificent voice. And he sang with all his might as he moved from pew to pew. Bolt upright in the aisle, he thundered out the hymn, on his black-whiskered face a twisted smile of hope and misgiving—while he kept one eye on the fateful south window.

One morning the sun surprised him.

The congregation was kneeling in prayer. Alfred, in the middle of a loudly-chanted response, raised his eyes. Long bright rays were streaming into the church, reaching to the foot of the altar. Not yet had Alfred carried his collection box to the vestry. He rose from his knees, leaned forward over the pew, clapped the nearest worshipper on the back :

"Be so kind ! Hold on to this box of money ! My bees may be swarming any minute !"

And he bolted out of the church.

For this incident the rector—who had also seen the sun—chose to scold his warden with secret humour.

"Nolan, my good fellow, you banged that pew door as if you were shutting in a whole brood of prize hens——"

"Whereas all I had there," Nolan quickly forestalled his old pastor, "was one prize chicken——" a small girl with the liveliest eyes, cheeks like a couple of show apples, who was often overheard making the offer to share her father's church window vigil.

"Father, rest your neck ; I'm sure 'tis tired. It's my turn to look out for the sun . . ."

This child's name was Christina.

## VI

CHRISTINA NOLAN was now nineteen, not quite a year older than Rolf, with whom her first meeting took the form of a chance encounter in her father's workshop — where he made and repaired his shoes.

This workshop was built over the scullery, on the flat roof, the whole forming an extension of the house-end. From the roadside gate at the top of the garden path it was reached by climbing ten wooden steps. By an inner door you could pass through on to a landing between the bedrooms. At the other end of this landing was Christina's sewing-room, the largest in the house.

There she employed two young girls.

Early that morning, while the ground was frosted and it was still dark, a lamb was born dead in the meadow below the apiary. Shortly after breakfast an old ewe collapsed after giving birth to a single lamb of good size. The cowman and the farmer made a jacket of the dead lamb's skin, which they tied on to the orphan. This was to induce the surviving ewe to adopt it. But the coat didn't fit, or was badly tied; and the sheep would have nothing to do with the fosterling.

The farmer turned, and grunted at his dog.

His dog got up and walked a few yards farther off, and lay down again, looking on at the scene with vagrant interest. The lamb in the false coat sank absurdly to the ground, after trying to forage beneath the old ewe's belly. Its legs had not got their strength yet. The sheep stirred out of the lamb's reach, glass-eyed, stupefied, moving toward a patch of turf

where earlier it had made its futile effort at creation. Farmer and cowman pondered. The sun was shining, but the wind bit through its rays. The farmer glanced round the field.

At last he said :

"Better put them in one of the pens."

He spoke as if there were something novel in this situation of the sheep and the lamb, which he had just thought out.

"Yes, I reckon," slowly agreed the cowman, who had done the same sort of thing many a time. He picked up the lamb and carried it over to a three-sided pen, sheltered from the wind but open to the sun ; and they shepherded the ewe in with it. But before the cowman could withdraw the lamb fell down once more, and he stooped and grasped it firmly by the scruff of its back.

"There ; stand on your legs." And as the lamb began to forage again he assured it familiarly : "You'll find a tit all right, by'm'bye."

But their fine ruse failed. When the farmer went back to the pen he found the lamb deserted, its jacket almost off. He called out to the cowman :

"When you are finished over there, I'll tell 'ee what. This critter b'ant quite clean of its own mother, I see. The old yawe didn't quite finish her job before she died. Better take it along and give it a wash in warm water. Then we'll ask the bee-keeper's girl to fit the coat on properly." He laughed.

"I'll tell her you'll be giving 'er a couple of chops from it later on," said the cowman.

The farmer grunted.

"Nay, I'll sell this one whole, or likely keep him. He'll make out a fine ram."

At noon Christina was about to dismiss her two young sewing girls for lunch. All three had just heard Mr. Nolan's



wheelbarrow come trundling down the road from the allotment.

Christina stuck some pins in her mouth before she spoke.

"That will be Uncle Peter and his new lodger. I wonder how they have enjoyed the morning together."

She went on tacking the hem of a skirt.

The two young girls were secretly wanting to run headlong downstairs to get a glimpse of Rolf. But for obscure reasons they dallied. The younger one, Bertha, who was thirteen, hung round for her companion, who was a year older.

"Helen, do come!" at last she said patiently.

"If you don't be off, you two," said Christina, "you'll find your dinner cold. . . Besides, you'll miss seeing the visitor."

They went downstairs, on each face a most becoming air, as if on turning at the foot of the stairway they might meet face to face this strange young man. But when they got outside there was only the wheelbarrow on the road, close in under the tall hedge above the house, near the gate.

Helen regarded the old barrow.

By a movement of her head, almost a toss, she caused a ringlet of dark hair to stray over the front of her shoulder. But the barrow could not admire hair, however beautiful. And she said with a show of disdain :

"Anyway, who wants to see him?"

"I'd like to," said Bertha.

They set off together down the white road as the cowman was going into the kitchen by the back door, the lamb under his arm, its jacket in his other hand. The bee-keeper's wife was baking ; she had invited him to step inside.

"Come in, Mr. Brett," she called out. "Have you brought us a nice bit of lamb for the week-end?"

Christina had followed her girls downstairs.

"Oh! What a fine young lamb!" She saw how bare it was, and that it was newborn.

"'Tis a ram," said the cowman.

He placed it on the rug in front of the fire, its hind legs under it, its fore-legs extended. On his own smooth and ruddy face was an expression of foolish contentment. He was holding out to Christina the skin of the lamb that had died.

"Can 'ee measure un for a new suit?"

"Not unless you make him stand up, Will," she said, regarding the creature with approval. "He wouldn't make much of a watch-dog, mother. He likes our kitchen fire too much. Look at the firelight in his ears. The sun shines through like that when they are in the fields. Aren't they thin, the first few days?"

The young ram lay passively on the hearth rug.

Christina's mother had taken the skin of the dead lamb from the cowman. She was fingering its tough edge.

"Better run upstairs for one of the strong shoe needles," she addressed her daughter. "You'll find it just the thing."

This was true, but Christina had plenty of sewing needles of her own that would have done equally well. Remotely through the kitchen ceiling the tall, spare, responsive woman had heard laughter, joyful and loud, in men's voices. . .

MEANWHILE Rolf's heart was warming itself in the homely atmosphere of the cobbler's shop. The exuberant bee-keeper assured him kindly: "You'll go from strength to strength, like the man in the Bible." He invited him to make his house a home from home.

Peter Nolan said his brother was a great Bible scholar; he had once won a prize at Sunday-school for —

"Never being late for a year," Alfred laughed.

Rolf told them he had won for the same thing ; he had still got it.

"Must be a very old book," said the gardener.

"After all these years," the bee-keeper joined in.

This added to their good humour.

Though he was the younger of the two, Alfred's black whiskers had long ago turned nearly white. Now he joked about the new silvery streaks in his brother's beard, declaring that he dyed it with snuff. The elder Nolan protested. From the day he was weaned he had longed for a grey beard, he said. Then Rolf, who had accepted a pinch of snuff, began to sneeze all round the workshop, ending up in a corner ; where he was sneezing his head off as Christina, in great haste, came into the workshop by the inside door.

"Father, I want to borrow one of your leather needles ——"

"A leather needle ! They're all of the best steel, my girl. But when this young fellow has stopped sneezing I've no doubt he'll let me introduce you."

The presentation was made amid much laughter, for Rolf's face had gone as red as a turkey's wattle. The two men joined in together proudly :

"This is Christina, my daughter"——"Christina, my niece."

And Rolf, holding Christina's hand, had to turn aside for a last sneeze ; while Nolan the elder cried : "A good job the old stallion isn't hereabouts !"

Which had to be explained to the others.

And then Rolf was taken downstairs to see the infant ram, Christina announcing it to be a new shorn-breed of house-dog.

Later in the day he saw the lamb again.

It was wearing its new coat, a ludicrous changeling alongside its foster-mother, its forepaws across her shank. She had adopted it with no air of triumph or achievement.

LESS pastoral but not less interesting were the bees, as Rolf soon found with the arrival of warmer weather. At the bottom of the orchard, in the right-hand corner, there stood an almond tree of queer shape. Its roots grew down below the path and its trunk rose straight up, but none of its branches on the path side had been allowed to grow. They had been lopped off so that they should not overtop the hive on the left in the bottom row. Christina told Rolf that from her window in winter, when the tree was bare, it had the shape of a question-mark. Now this tree was in full bloom, its branches sweeping over to the left like a splendid spray.

In its blossom were the bees, in immense numbers.

Rolf had been cutting away a prickly thorn, which was growing up into the tree. But he was compelled to stop because of the excited whirr in the branches. When the bees had settled down again he resumed more cautiously, but paused again and again to watch them, how they flicked off more and more petals in their winged rhapsody, or trod them down with their feet as they sought new blossom to alight on.

"Christina, I suppose *all* these are your father's bees?"

She was standing close up to him beside the tree. She fell into his mood at once, assumed his meditative manner. If he had looked at her he might have seen his solemn air serenely caricatured.

"I wonder . . . I reckon they will be. But that one there"—nearly touching one bee, which was fatter than the rest—"looks rather like a stranger."

"A stranger! In what way? Take care!"

He murmured the girl's name softly, in a startled, rising cadence, as she withdrew her hand slowly.

"Christina!"

He put his forefinger next to hers—

"Let it crawl on to mine."

"Never being late for a year," Alfred laughed.

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"Christina!"

He put his forefinger next to hers—

"Let it crawl on to mine."

Several times he had seen her father's hands covered with them, and marvelled at such confidence. But the bee flew back into the tree. It would not, Christina pretended, have felt at home on his finger after being on hers.

"Pick up another one, Rolf. They'll let you."

He laid his finger carefully in front of one after another of the busy creatures, but each one flew over it on to some other blossom. He gave it up and returned to his original idea.

"They are your father's bees, then?"

## VII

ONLY two important events had happened so far this year to link the village of Barns, socially, with the life beyond its borders : the arrival of Rolf and the visit of the piano-tuner to the rectory.

The tuner came on the mail-coach one afternoon.

At the same moment a tall young fellow who was about to go into the post-office paused and turned in the doorway, his eyes following the coach. This young man was a carpenter ; he was lean and hardy, with hands and face the colour of brick. He had a swaggering, loose carriage.

He went into the post-office.

Piled up on the counter were loaves of bread with crackling tops, warm, just in from the bakery ; the post-office was also the village store.

"A penny stamp, if you please, Miss Brett. Piano-tuner's just gone up, I see."

"I saw'm," was the brief reply.

In this matter of the tuner the postmistress had no need to bow to superior knowledge. None whatever. She gave two light sniffs, which betokened no indifference toward the man who had gone by on the coach. Nor did she add that she knew the passenger's age to a year. It was forty-seven. The kitchen-maid at the rectory had told her when it was only thirty. The year the piano was bought. That particular girl had soon afterwards gone away. But the parlour-maid there now, briefly confidential with Miss Brett, had told her after his visit last year, that the piano-tuner was still a bachelor.



On the young carpenter Miss Brett's two light sniffs were not lost. Amusement shone in his eyes and was plain on his tightened lips, which, this discriminating spinster had made up her mind before today, were too thin. Really too thin. Now the tuner's lips. . .

In a more affable voice she said :

"He was properly muffled up ! Still . . . it may turn colder before night." And she added : "He looks never a day older."

To make more room on the counter Miss Brett pushed the warm loaves to one side, giving her customer his stamp while she still held on to his change.

"He's not one of your marrying sort," she said.

It sounded like a compliment, the way she put it ; as if she could so distinguish the man on the coach, by a fine line, from this bold young carpenter, who was secretly engaged—she had heard—to a young and pretty school teacher much above him in station.

"For that matter, neither are you, Miss Brett."

"Oh, I don't know." Her laugh carried some meaning. "You know what they say, Fred Dell."

Dell was shaking his head negatively.

"No ; what *do* they say ?"

"That chance is a fine thing."

Dell flushed. "If 'twas you I was going to wed, shall I tell 'ee what I'd do to 'ee ?"

"Fred Dell ! Fred Dell ! You'll go the same road as the sexton, if you don't take care."

He gave his thigh a resounding slap.

"Well, I wouldn't mind having a grave of my own," he said, "if it had some of that crooked old boy's plunder stored away in it !"

In Barns churchyard there was a grave wherein, it was said,

nobody was buried. The sexton had spent most of his vigorous young manhood on the ocean. Then he had turned up mysteriously, early one morning, having come ashore in the night from an open boat. And for thirty years or more the legend that he had spent his days at sea in some kind of illicit dealing little short of piracy, had grown and grown.

"Buried treasure, I'll be bound!" Dell slapped his thigh again.

Miss Brett gave two more light sniffs, barely audible; a habit which increased the pinched aquilinity of her rather long nose. In her forehead was a small dent, white like an old burn, which might have been caused in childhood by a fall into the fender. She had counted out threepence change, but still held on to twopence. Her long narrow chin was tilted, thumb pressed down on the fourth penny on the counter.

"Let me see"—ruminating aloud. She was conning the years since she had first seen the piano-tuner go up to the rectory. "Fourpence"—thumb on the last penny. She brought her gaze back to the ruddy face of the young carpenter. "Of course——" with an air of recovered certainty—"It must have been the same year they got the piano. It's a Grand piano, you know," Miss Brett said.

"Very grand!"

"And that—fivepence, thank you very much, Mr. Dell"—very politely—"was the year my niece was born, and she is seventeen. *Oh!* Fred Dell!"

Laughing in her face, which had reddened at his final words, Dell swaggered out of the post-office.

If that, Miss Brett reflected, was a young fellow's idea of love it was not, she was sure, the idea of a sensible man like the piano-tuner. How comfortable he had looked in his over-

coat, and his great muffler, seated on top of the coach ! A man like that would never dream of giving his bride a clouting until she squealed.

FOR the first five years of those regular visits Miss Brett had believed the tuner came all the way from London. But that report, invented in the rector's kitchen, was an untruth to exaggerate the importance of his visit. He used to come from Bristol. But he had since moved to Plymouth, from where, twice a year, he visited scores of villages.

PAUSING before shutting her stamp drawer, which would soon need to be restocked, Miss Brett looked up in time to see Mr. Nolan and his new help—who, everybody said, had come to Barns for his health—go past the post-office window, on their way down from the allotment.

What a short afternoon they had worked !

Then Miss Brett saw why.

Their wheelbarrow was filled high with spring vegetables. The boy was pushing the barrow. Goodness ! How much better he had begun to look ! He would soon be the colour of Fred Dell.

"Now when *I* was eighteen," the postmistress said aloud, in the store by herself, but diverted her thought. "Thank God, tuner came into my life when he did ! Thank God, tuner has never had eyes for another woman !"

She often read her future in the palm of her hand.

ROLF pushed the wheelbarrow slowly, taking care not to upset it. He kept his eyes on his load of vegetables, then on to the bit of road in front. Twenty yards farther on two small streams came down from the fields to join in a turgid rivulet by the roadside, and at the foot of the lane that emerged there

the wheelbarrow came to a full stop. Miss Brett had come to the shop door to follow its progress, and she could not at first see why it had stopped. She protruded just her chin and her nose beyond the door jamb, as if looking straight ahead.

Now there were three persons there instead of two.

The newcomer was Peter Nolan's niece, Christina. She was carrying a flat cardboard box. But why, at this stage, did Mr. Nolan take up the barrow and go home with it alone? And why did the other two turn off together, suddenly, and go up the lane? There was no accounting for tastes, but it was hard to think the bee-keeper's daughter could be setting her cap at that ordinary young fellow; at that ordinary boy! Remembering, as Miss Brett did, the beautiful chance this girl had let slip, even thrown away, a year or two back.

The postmistress went back into the post-office.

She studied her face in an old square mirror which hung on the wall between a side of ham and a case of Scotch oats.

"I must get a new looking-glass," she said. She laughed to herself. Suppose, indeed, that the tuner should see her face in that awful, cheap mirror; he would think her mouth was crooked.

So far these two had never exchanged a word.

\* \* \* \*

ROLF and Christina soon arrived at the crown of the lane where they halted. Here there was a gap in the hedge on each side, with two opposite gates that would admit from one field to the other. The right-hand gate revealed a sweep of meadows, falling gradually to the brook where it was wide and deep, and apparently still.

Suddenly a shepherd's dog, at first invisible, set up a sharp barking. Each bark was followed by two distinct echoes.

Wherever was the dog? Rolf could not see it. But Chris-

tina was familiar with the echo zone and she pointed across the valley.

"Taking those sheep through the gate."

Neither sheep nor dog could the boy see. Again and again the triple bark resounded—such ricocheting barks! At last he saw them. Sheep, dog, the gate and also the shepherd were plainly visible; his eye must have passed over them twenty times. The dog passed out of the echo zone, ceased to bark, its task done: Rolf watched the scene until the shepherd, passing through the gate last, vanished from view. His succeeding laugh had a dubious ring. They fell to joking, but he pressed Christina to test his sight.

The girl pointed to an object on the farther slope. "Do you see that horse?"

"Horse!" Rolf's spirits rose. Was his sight, after all, better than hers? "It is an ordinary cow, surely!"

"How awful! It is Farmer Denby's prize bull. He'd be terribly upset to think you had mistaken it for an ordinary cow." She pretended to be concerned, too.

Stock-still, the boy let her gaze in turn into each of his eyes. While she was doing this he kept his own gaze on her forehead and her green tam-o'shanter, which, he thought, suited her.

"That one seems a good eye," she said at last, looking from the right to the left. "And the other one seems even sounder. I'll be bound they don't miss much . . . half a dozen sheep or so. Pity," she went on to make him laugh again, "I haven't my optic glass with me to test them properly."

The girl laughed and turned away.

She began to pay attention to her cardboard box on the ground beside the gate-post. She picked up the box, and flipped off some fragments of soil. Her box contained a frock

she had made for the young wife of the farmer who owned the prize bull.

Rolf now agreed to Christina's proposal that he should sit on the gate and await her return from the farm.

He allowed his thoughts to drift absently to Alderlow, and to Polly of the Bull Inn.

What so wild as thoughts are ?

Words are tame beside them : they are invariably less faithful than deeds, and much less so than human feeling. They bear little relation to time and none to distance. But in this instance of their transfer from the virginal form of Christina as she disappeared with lively step round the bend in the lane, to the surpassingly ripe figure of the chamber-maid as she occurred in Rolf's brain, the essence of curiosity and instinctive infidelity may have been about evenly blended. He was in the bedroom at the inn again, with Polly, in a renewal of that scene on the morning of his arrival there, when she had lingered in the doorway.

"If the brandy makes you tipsy, call me—Polly . . ."

What if he had rung the bell for her ?

He could not remember whether there was a bell. Then how would he have summoned her ? Might he not have jumped out of bed and looked through the window into the yard, where he heard her laughing voice ?

What would he have called to her ?

He imagined himself calling in low but penetrating tones :  
"Polly ! Polly ! I'm drunk . . ."

And if he had called to Polly and she had come, what then ?

He would have had to pretend to be intoxicated.

Such contingent scenes as he now improvised, seated on the gate here in the lane, included an episode fancifully staged

on the cold linoleum floor of the inn bedroom, in which Rolf, barefoot, in his pyjamas, was chased round the bed by the jolly chamber-maid, whom he continued to elude with exclamations discreetly subdued.

"Polly! Who would have thought it . . . on that little teaspoonful of brandy? Polly . . ."

Now if there is one thing more than another that the Devil may be supposed to like it is chamber comedy, and here, veritably, was a ready-made part; and he promptly answered his cue. Before Rolf could bring down the curtain he found his uneasy sensibilities assailed by a wave of feeling so insurgent, so vital, that he leapt from the gate almost into the middle of the lane.

Restless, he looked up into the branches of the chestnut tree growing out of the opposite hedge.

It was a beautiful tree.

Ten minutes ago he had mistaken it for an oak, because of its size; and Christina had not laughed. Instead she had promised to tell him the names of all trees.

Of immense girth, this chestnut's lower branches had been lopped off to a good height. Its long buds were like coloured cocoons, each one a tight rainbow cocoon, with a point, glistening and sticky. Some of them had begun to unwrap, and resembled small green handkerchiefs partly shaken out. That was how Christina had described them:

"Like little green handkerchiefs . . ."

At the foot of the tree a speckled bird hopped in under the hedge out of sight. Its beak was full enough of worms to choke it. The boy waited a minute, then dropped on to his knees. Scratched by thorns, he pushed his face into the interior of the hedge. Two thrushes—a fluffy bundle with two heads—sat passively in the nest. One of them half rose up in alarm, gazing at him with eyes like two live, bright beads.

The other turned upon him a weary look and, as if even a bird could suppress her tremors in face of impending disaster, remained still.

Perhaps she nestled deeper.

Leant forward upon his hands, the boy stirred under the burden of his own weight ; the bird that had moved hopped out of the nest in affright, the other one rose to its feet : his withdrawal was causing more commotion within the hedge than his approach had done.

He heard Christina's footsteps in the lane.



## VIII

THIS old village, in a westerly part of England, had from the first set up in Rolf faint memories of a place long ago, which he could not be sure he had ever set eyes on.

His mother wrote in a letter to him :

"I imagine Barns Lea to be like Baslow, in Derbyshire, where I was born and went to school. It sounds like it, by what you say." In her letter she reminded her son that she had once taken him to Baslow—"soon after you began to walk. But it is unlikely you can remember anything about it."

Rolf could recollect her talking about it years ago, at home. His mother had described Baslow Church, surrounded by trees that were wonderful to see in full leaf in summer. It had the prettiest churchyard. She had talked of the aged sexton, who one day caught her skipping on a plank over a new grave he had begun to fill in. Rolf at the age of two was taken to see this historic figure, one summer during a visit by his mother to her birthplace. But how much of this event he retained in his mind even at four was not clear.

She had asked him then :

"You remember the sexton at Baslow, Rolf ? You know . . . that little old man who leaned over the lych-gate."

"What is a lych-gate ?"

Next Rolf wanted to know : "Had he his big spade ?"

"No, it was on a Sunday ; we went to the service. He shook hands with me and picked you up and said : 'Bless my soul ! Ain't you like your mammy ?' You know, surely. The sexton . . . he was in his best clothes. He wore a funny

flat billycock hat with a little green feather stuck in the band."

"Like a pipe-cleaner?"

"No, no, much smaller. Ever so little. Whoever saw a green pipe-cleaner!"

The four-year-old boy insisted: "I did."

"Where?"

"In the sexton's hat."

But the decorative feather stuck in the grave-digger's hat-band had come, in fact, from the wing of a drake on the farmyard pond.

ON the whole, sextons of country churchyards are benignant folk. They can wish no evil to those who fall into their hands. It is too late. Few men fail to be courteous to them, and women, as a rule, show them a studied politeness. Children are much more diffident. Their glances are at first fleeting, or in the nature of a wondering stare. The overture of speech between a grave-digger and a child invariably comes from the grave-digger.

When the sexton of Baslow had come upon Rolf's mother, a girl of seven skipping on the plank, he wished her a friendly good morning. Whereupon her spirits, dashed by his unexpected arrival, returned with such a glow that she offered to show him her swiftest dance.

"Would you like to see me do 'pepper'?"

She promised not to fall into the grave—though indeed the hole was hardly two feet deep; the coffin had been placed in it that morning and had already five feet of earth above it.

As far as Rolf could ever recall this story told by his mother, the sexton had replied:

"Yes, miss, I would like to see you do 'pepper.' My little gran'da'ter can't do it, howsoever she tries. But first let me

shift these wreaths farther off, lest your skipping-rope cuts the blooms off the stems."

PERHAPS that episode of a bygone day may have been near to the top of Rolf's mind, late one afternoon, when he was cycling on the outskirts of the parish of Barns. He jumped off his bicycle opposite the church, about two miles from Peter Nolan's allotment. An oddly bent figure in an old battered hat was emerging through the lych-gate. His pipe had gone out and he carried his spade on his shoulder at a lofty angle. He addressed Rolf in his broad country tongue, wished him good evening, adding that there was rain in the air. He had the powerful body of a dwarf, with a dwarf's long arms, and his legs were really long though crooked. By some inward power, surprising in one so gnarled and old, he could raise himself to a much greater height.

Visibly before Rolf's astonished eyes he enlarged himself; his voice, despite the innocence of his request, was bold and rasping: "Have 'ee got a match?"

With his disengaged hand he made an alarming gesture toward the handle of his spade, which he brought upright above his head, then grounded with a clang on the stones.

Rolf started backward, dragging his bicycle.

"Hey!" laughed the sexton of Barns. "You thought I were a little feller, and you find I be'ant! So they all do. So do they all."

Now he crinkled up again, becoming once more a crooked figure with a crouch; his sardonic face was covered with wisps like fine straw, a side-whiskery overgrowth that met, almost, across his yellow-tusked mouth. But his chin was bare.

The uncomfortable boy handed over his box of matches.

Staring hard at Rolf's bicycle the sexton announced, steadily : " 'Twoddn' like that when I was a boy." Along with his empty pipe he had stowed the matchbox away in his pocket.

"Like which ?"

"They bicycles . . . An' now I've heard tell o' zummat else. They Boers, across the water in S'uth Africa, have won a great victory. They've killed forty more o' we !" He grew more resentful, and began to raise himself provokingly.

"But I'm not a Boer." Rolf attempted a most disarming smile.

"Boers have beards," said the grave-digger with obscure conviction, drawing his hand with a fondling gesture down the front of his chest. "How would you, *you*," he asked roughly, "like to be scalt on the chin by the wench who boiled your babby-milk ?"

Involuntarily Rolf fixed his gaze on this ancient man's beardless chin : he wanted his matches back, and as an amiable diversion he broached the subject of his mother's friend, the sexton of Baslow, and the feather he had worn in his hat.

But the sexton of Barns showed little belief in the story.

" 'Twere a drake's veather, you say ?"

"I think so."

"Be'ant 'ee sure ?"

"Mother said so."

"An' she wuddn' lie, though she've bred a son who is a liar." The old fellow chuckled noisily, and began to grow tall. At his full height, fingering the band of his decrepit hat, he assumed an air of cunning reason ; the boy had stirred slightly as if to step farther back.

"Mebbe 'twas a badge ?"

"Very likely."

"Of 'is calling as a sexton ?"

Rolf skipped out of reach, leapt on his bicycle, pedalled up the lane leading out to the cliff road, followed by the cry :

“That veather, now ! Wod a pigeon’s do ?”

“Yes,” over his shoulder he shouted — “or a gander’s.”

It was a shout of hysterical derision.

## IX

**B**ELOW, on his right hand, was the sea. In the distance ahead three tall spires rose sharply above the level of the cliff ; they belonged to the monastery in the valley. A faint evening sun, low over the water, invested the upper half of each spire with a white sheen. But for this sheen Rolf might not yet have picked them out among the tree-tops appearing above the lip of the basin.

That was Monks Vale.

A man in a high dogcart was approaching and soon passed him by on the road. He was the prior of the monastery. He was driving a spirited horse at a fast pace. In his entirely black clothes, with a round cloth cap fitting like a beret, setting off the lean calm face, he was a picture of individual certainty and poise. He held his horse on a taut rein, imposing without effort his own restraint upon its fire.

Rolf wondered upon what errand, so resolutely, this priest could be bound. It could hardly occur to him that the prior, grown perhaps more than usually tired of the silence of the monastery, was taking the animal out for an hour's exercise. He felt inclined to turn his bicycle round, bolt after him, and so pass the dwarf, or giant, of the churchyard safely in the wake of that swift trap. But he let the chance slip.

As it befell, instead, the prior presently turned aside, following a track that led to the old Monks Walk and directly on to Alderlow. Moreover, the prior might not have been pleased with the boy's company. In the privacy of the lanes, it was said, he was prone to break his monastic oath of silence by talking, in a low voice, to his horse.

One eventful fall from grace only was quoted by the village gossips, but it was enough. On a beautiful June morning two years ago a ploughman behind a hedge, seated with his back to a tree eating his lunch of bread and cheese, had seen the prior pull up his steed, spring from the trap, and go up to the animal's head. Then—if one could believe the astonished ploughman's version of the episode—the prior addressed his horse in these words :

"Well, boy, this be a voine day for we ! A real voine day."

The ploughman told his story in Barns Lea's oldest inn, "The Plighted Troth." He was positive the day was twice described ; equally, he was sure that the prior also told his horse, in a voice too low for him to catch the exact words, that June was the sweet-est month of the year.

"So 'tis ! So 'tis !" all the gossips agreed over their tankards in the bar parlour ; and one of them, who spoke alone, added with rustic gravity : "'Twasn' as if 'e told a lie, wi' that bit."

"So 'twasn' ! So 'twasn'," they all agreed.

"Besides," added the same solitary philosopher, still leading the company, "the hoss wasn't under a vow of silence."

\* \* \* \*

THIS matter of the prior's secret sin, however, was unknown to Rolf, who presently reached the monastery gate. From the cliff road he had descended the incline at an easy speed, his feet off the pedals all the way.

It was now dusk.

What light was left lay mainly over the sea. This fading western glow touched the seaboard side of the monastery and created deep shadows here in the forecourt. Dark shapes with long points reached almost as far as this gateway. Here Rolf halted. The doors thirty yards away, massive and tall, were open ; and he could see through the arch dimly into

the great enclosure. A bat, restless in the air, dipped near his head in a measured curve. It performed a few startling arcs near to him, then vanished.

"Good night, brother," somebody said in a resonant voice. And in a richer, softer tone, the voice of a much younger man answered :

"Good night, brother !"

The owners of these voices across the courtyard were invisible to Rolf. But from within the archway the great doors were slowly closed by the speaker who had uttered the first farewell. The doors met the iron ground-stop in the middle of the opening with a deep clang, as if that part of each door was metallised ; bolts were shut down into the ground and there was the grating noise of a bar going into place. A small inset door was then opened and left wide. An old bald head and a pair of robed shoulders were thrust out through this panel of light and the first deep voice repeated in a lower tone :

"Good night, brother."

This was again answered in similar words, but more softly still, by the second speaker.

Who could they be, these two men who had spoken so kindly to each other, and why did they thus take leave ? Rolf gazed round the court for the owner of the second voice, then once more at the panel of light in the great arch. Gradually this panel faded out ; then as the darkness became universal it reappeared, but now it was black, of vague shape, no longer an entrance but an exit.

The monastery was in complete gloom.

"Good evening, brother !"

This time, there could be no doubt, Rolf himself was being addressed. An apparitional form, so it seemed, had material-



ised on the spot, and advanced through the darkness towards him ; it was as tall as the sexton of Barns. But the gracious voice recognisably belonged to the invisible man who had spoken before, in reply to the old monk's good night. This figure, which had come lightly across the grass, now paused in its leisured tread upon the gravel.

"I'm afraid I have startled you."

Rolf ceased to step back from the stranger whom he could hardly see. So much relief he felt, he wanted to run forward with a welcome greeting.

"At first I was startled," he replied. "I think I saw you before you spoke. Are you one of the monks? "

"Yes."

There was a satisfied pause between them.

At the monk's invitation Rolf went with him to sit down on a garden seat near the monastery wall. To the left, a few feet away, were the great doors and the little dark opening not quite in the middle. Rolf and the monk, in voices suited to the stillness, carried on their talk as if each had known the other all his life. At dusk the monk had heard Rolf come cycling down the hill. He was then on this seat, screened by a tree, and had watched him until darkness fell.

"At last I thought you must be gone, but I had not heard you move off. Besides," he said with conclusive logic, "you had not lit your bicycle lamp . . ."

Rolf asked what duty his companion performed out here.

"No duty at all," replied the monk, and in a tone of mild raillery at his own expense he explained that he had been waiting near the gate since morning. This was his annual day to receive visitors. A friend, upon whose visit he had counted, had not arrived.

"I am sure," he summed up this disappointment serenely, "she could not come. She could not come."

A third time he said this, and fell into an almost soundless soliloquy, then picked up, as if there had been no lapse, the thread of his remarks.

"This morning I heard the coach from Alderlow arrive at the top of the hill. Inside the monastery we do not hear it, but out here on a fine day the postillion's call sounds very clearly. Last year a strong breeze blew the notes of his horn out to sea, and I missed them. . . But the year before I heard them at once, from this same seat."

Demonstratively, with the ends of his fingers he tapped the stout wooden form.

"I am as sure as one can be sure," the young monk went on—speaking now as a man who reassures himself afresh—"that she meant to come. Whatever can have happened to her?"

He sighed most deeply.

Rolf was about to ask who *she* was; but his companion, rallying himself with mild humour, changed the subject.

"Let us not repine," he said. "After all, I shall take back with me into my cell two new memories. Your face at the gate, your voice here beside me. Even your bicycle——" he laughed comfortlessly. "Where is it?"

"Leaned up against the tree."

"That too I shall remember. A veritable museum of memories!"

A strangely ironic taint had crept into his words, which were succeeded by another sigh. For the first time Rolf heard, remotely, the pull back of the sea on the shingle, and he was going to speak of it; but the monk made a new inquiry.

"Why were you brooding so deeply there at the gate? You drooped over your bicycle so long"—again that comfortless laugh—"I believed you were falling asleep. Then you gazed

up at this wall as if it bore some writing you wished to read."

"I was looking for the windows."

"Windows?"

Before Rolf had time to assent his companion joined in upon a different note altogether, a note of innocent and child-like discovery :

"Our voices sound nice in the dark!"

"Yes."

With spontaneous enthusiasm the monk sprang up from the garden seat, emitting a loud cry of happy relief.

"Indeed! Indeed!" he exclaimed, "it is nice to speak to somebody else besides ——" His words had tailed off into a sort of gasp, and now he was crossing himself repeatedly, a dark erect figure in front of the seated boy, who asked with frozen calm :

"Besides whom?"

"*Somebody else besides God,*" the monk completed his sentence in a terrified whisper.

In his heavy boots he turned swiftly, scrunching the gravel with his heels, lurched along by the wall; Rolf heard both his hands slide across its surface, feeling for the inset door.

## X

THE monk's cell must have been somewhere near the far corner of the quadrangle, or garden : his bewailing journey to it had lasted so long. Rolf was positive, too, he had heard someone else on the inner side of the great door, someone who, in tenderest remonstrance barely above a whisper, said :

"Brother, brother, come in !"

But he had not heard that other person again, nor any other movement but the shambling footsteps of his nameless friend, who had begun as an apparition, existed as a voice, ended in a sob.

Rolf was now out upon the coach road.

His brain was acutely alive, stimulated by the darkness and solitude, combined with all that had happened. He noticed an aroma as of some sweet herb upon the palm of his left hand, which was damp with sweat, like his forehead. It clung to his right hand, too, but less pungently, and could not be smelled at all upon the back of either. Between his fingers this scent was very strong. It was from the bush, or shrub, into which he had pushed his front wheel, when making his way out to the gate. This remembrance came in a flash after a brief interval of blank wonder, complete inability to recall that he had forcibly grasped the shrub with each hand in turn, to dislodge it from the spokes of his bicycle wheel.

He hoped that the prior would come along the road in his high dog-cart, returning from his afternoon trip. Passionately he dwelt upon this hope, as if to will it real. In a

nerveless voice, which he strove to deepen in quality, he rehearsed aloud this conversational encounter :

*"Good night, prior ! How cool and still it is !"*

*"Yes, a lovely night ; I am a little late in getting back."*

*"I am afraid——"* Rolf turned partly, looking over his shoulder at the imaginary dog-cart, then sang out into the darkness of the lonely road—*"I am afraid, prior, that is also the case with me."* By which time the prior would probably be too far off for anything else between them to be heard.

The conversation was a huge success. It made him feel less lonely. He was quite sorry when the passer-by he had conjured up vanished into the night. It was over all too soon. So he decided to meet the prior again.

But this time he elaborated the pantomime.

Cocking his ear, he listened intently ; lowering his head, he peered forward into the darkness, as if to discern something far off—gig-lights, perhaps. Yes ; and the sound of a trotting horse, too ! Aloud, and very speculatively, with comically earnest realism, he pretended to wonder who it might be :

*"Not the old prior, surely ?"*

Now the prior was certainly not an aged man ; and the way Rolf used the word *old* was not meant to imply age. The word was used cordially.

Nearer . . . still nearer came the phantom vehicle, and the boy's heart quickened happily with the vigour of his fancy.

*"By Jove ! So it is !"*

As one who finds himself right after some slight doubt, he affected agreeable surprise ; yes, it was the prior after all, his lean face deeply in shadow but none the less rocklike ; indeed, in his close-fitting beret a head and face of bronze, a sculptor's delight ! Rolf stepped closer in to the side of the road, presumably, until that moment, not having been seen, for he cried out as if to allay somebody's obvious surprise :

*"Ah! Prior, I'm so sorry! I ought to have called out to you that I was here. I must have startled you."*

*"Not at all, my boy. I saw you, but I don't think my horse did——"* and already gone by and forced to raise his priestly voice to a shout: *"Take care, my boy! Take care not to fall over the cliff! You are wise not to ride in such darkness."*

It would, of course, have been a nice piece of thoughtfulness on the part of the prior's ghost to have offered a match to light Rolf's bicycle lamp. But it is very plain that an imaginary light will not illumine one's way home on a dark night. Which was doubtless the reason why Rolf, in this make-believe, did not cause the offer to be made.

By this time the boy had travelled, perhaps, a quarter of the distance between the monastery and Barns church. The mimic encounters had helped him well on the journey. Two aspects of the cool, still, enveloping night impressed him strongly. On the right hand side of the road the darkness solidified into an upward sweep of cliff—in height about thirty or forty feet—and on the left it was empty, with the sea as its floor. Though the floor was not visible it could be heard. At its edge, its liquid brink, it had sound and movement, lapping and spilling with faint noises seventy or more feet below.

Rolf spoke his thoughts again.

Now it was to a girl whom he addressed by name, the daughter of Alfred the bee-keeper.

"You can imagine, Christina, how I felt when the monk had gone off to his cell. . . You can well imagine it!" he repeated, and his voice had a breathless excited ring; it carried a feeling of boyish wonder which Christina—had she been there—must have been quick to appreciate.

"I felt," Rolf continued, "as if I had been left, without warning, in the presence of God, alone in the dark in the garden with God. I had no sense of alarm, no particular alarm. But it was a little overwhelming. Then, as I stood quite still a few feet from the great door, something ran over my feet ; perhaps a field-mouse. It was certainly lighter than a rat and it did not move like one. A rat leaps when it is in a hurry ; it does not run. That little creature, scuttering over the instep of both my feet, brought me back to myself ; restored my sense of reality. I confess that I jumped. You would have laughed, Christina"—he repeated her name because it made him feel she was really walking beside him. "You would have laughed to see me jump like that."

Rolf laughed companionably, sharing the merriment his anecdote of the field-mouse would have caused Christina.

Following his startled leap, he had felt his way toward his bicycle, and a minute later had shoved its front wheel into the scented bush. He described his haste, his wild haste ; how his foot had kicked his near-side pedal—"making it spin noisily."

Rolf's narrative flowed freely.

And indeed, for a free tale, there is no audience so good as an imaginary one. It does not interrupt, it asks no irrelevant questions, its interest is constant. The teller has boundless liberty to digress, to wander in the fields of his fancy or recollection ; he may, especially for the purpose of illustration, flit lightly or strike boldly across those fields with complete unself-consciousness.

Most surely, Christina would have been surprised ; no youth, either for her benefit or his own, had ever yet taken the bee-keeper's daughter so intimately into his confidence.

Rolf's theme, at this stage of his long walk home, was young love, the love which apparently can assail even the very

young ; which, at any rate, had stolen into his own heart at the unripe age of six.

Rolf at the age of six !

He was staying in York with his grandparents, to whose house one night there came a beautiful woman, a friend of his aunt. The two women, each in her early twenties, were dressing for a ball. His aunt's friend, having already got into her ball dress, but in some sort of difficulty with her corsage, came from her bedroom down to the maid in the kitchen, where Rolf was playing on the hearthrug. He threw down his toys, jumping to his feet. He took several steps backwards, placing one hand upon the kitchen table, to look up at this delightful creature, now almost ready for the dance. She, seeing his enchantment, and perhaps to add to it—or only to amuse herself—moved farther away from the fire-place so as to be out of range, in her wide pleated frock, of the big fire, and pirouetted upon her toes ; finally, poised upon one shoe-point like a ballet dancer, making a sweeping circle of flounces with the other foot. It was a movement of bewitching grace which evoked an exclamation from the maid-servant.

“Oh, miss ! That is very pretty. But if you do it again this boy will never get to sleep tonight. Look at his eyes ; you've mesmerised him !”

When this pretty woman picked Rolf up, holding him at arms' length, his ecstasy was profound : he looked down into her joyful eyes, at her surprisingly red lips, her tinted cheeks, her white throat and neck, so unlike any ordinary whiteness he had ever seen, bare down to the centre of her bosom upon which lay, attached to a slender chain, a small golden key.

He put out both hands to reach the key, but the woman laughed, put him down, and turning to the servant exclaimed with a renewal of haste :



"Jane, do look at my bodice at the back. I am sure there is a hook fastened into the wrong eye!"

That night Rolf fell asleep early, but awoke toward morning out of a startling and exquisite dream. He lay quite still for some moments, unwilling that his brother, who was two years older, should be aware of his purpose. Then he slid out of bed. Dawn was breaking, and he could see his suit of clothes clearly. He felt first in his waistcoat pockets, then to the bottom, with two fingers, of the breast-pocket in his jacket, next through both trousers pockets.

His brother stirred.

"What are you doing there, out of bed?"

Rolf, who had begun to feel again through all his pockets, paused.

"Nothing," he answered.

"Nothing! What a lie! It's exactly as mother says, you ought to be afraid to come to bed at nights. You'll grow up into a habitual liar."

"She didn't say that."

"What did she say, then?"

"She said," Rolf replied, recollecting her exact words with all his might, "that if *she* told a lie she would be afraid to go to sleep. She hoped we wouldn't tell lies, meaning you as well."

"It's just the same."

"No, it isn't."

The boy in bed sat up suddenly. "I say it is. Anyway, I give you another chance: what *were* you doing?"

Rolf replied that he was feeling for the golden key. *That* key, he called it. His brother asked, Which key?

"The one Miss O'Gorman had round her neck."

"But it's there yet. Her sweetheart, the man she's going

to marry, gave it to her. She wouldn't think of lending it to you."

Rolf said it wasn't lent. She had given it to him. "She came into the bedroom just now, as soon as she had come home from the ball. That's what woke me up."

"Just now !' She's been in bed hours, I tell you. Why, the milkman will be round with the morning's milk in a minute. I can hear the rattle of his cans."

"But she did !"

"Have you got it, then ?"

"No ; I can't find it."

"Of course you can't. Oh, what lies you are telling ! I simply won't speak another word to such a liar. I'm going straight to sleep."

The bigger boy flopped back on the pillow determinedly, pulling the clothes over his ears. Rolf climbed into bed and lay down. Next there was a sudden thump on the floor, something had fallen, and the aggressive challenge came from the pillow next to Rolf's : "I suppose you'll tell me it is that little key falling ?"

"No ; it was my big top. I forgot to put it back in my trousers pocket. It has rolled off the chair."

"Yes, and mother will kick it when she comes in to wake us, and she will fall and break her neck. And it will be your fault . . ."

ROLF's anecdote fell unchallenged upon the night air. It had carried him some yards beyond the church, the graveyard, past the house of the sexton, to whom he gave now only a passing thought—wondering merely whether the aged grave-digger slept in a long bed at full length, or in a short one, crumpled up like a concertina.

His next landmark would be the allotment where Peter Nolan's asparagus was now in full growth, the fresh shoots poking up their noses at sunrise each morning. For these homely acres the boy kept a sharp look-out on his left. His talk had ended more abruptly than it began, with no information as to the fate of the key or of the woman whose neck it had adorned. Both, it may be assumed, went eventually into the care of the same person : the man from whom its owner had received it as a gift, a keepsake . . .

It was eleven o'clock when Rolf reached home : a very late hour for the countryside. The gardener and his wife were in bed. But their bedroom door was open ; Mrs. Nolan had expected him soon, probably, and intended to stay awake until his arrival. Their snores came down to the foot of the stairs, reminding him of two people walking out of step.

So that it should not smoke, the oil lamp had been turned low. A polished pan, containing milk, stood next to it on a piece of paper, to protect the white table ; and there was a large slice of meat on a plate, some bread and a dish of fresh butter. Rolf warmed the milk and ate his supper ravenously.

Before turning out the lamp he lit a candle with a match from a box like the one he had gone out with that afternoon — a box, he noticed, just about as full.

To make doubly sure he had shot the bolt, he went over to the kitchen door again ; it had a wide glass panel inset, near the top — the right height for the sexton of Barns to peer through at him.

## XI

THAT night the moon rose at twelve o'clock.

Mrs. Nolan stirred in bed, beside the larger form of her husband. Because he went on sleeping with great breaths she would have liked to knock with her knuckles on his broad back, as upon some solid door, to tell him she had just heard Rolf go into his room.

The parlour clock was striking the hour.

Rolf's bedroom had two outlooks, across the coach-road into a climbing orchard on the east side; down the garden and over the brook to the west. This westerly window was the larger of the two, and directly opposite to it, in the hedge bordering the farther meadow, was a stile that led to a broad cart-track at the entrance to a wood. The cart-track was thickly covered with last year's leaves, which formed a dried and crinkly surface on a bed of mould. Obscurely visible, it receded into the dim interior. Its two extreme points were the garden gate of Mr. Nolan's house, where it began, and the coast, where it had its exit on the other side of the wood. The entire path was an ancient right-of-way. Many centuries old.

But on this side of the stile the only part of the path that could be discerned, even by day, was the disorderly ford across the stream — four or five huge boulders, moss-grown, slippery, and offering most dubious foothold. No one, in these days, ever came along to the garden gate to claim the right to go through to the wood. There was now a better way. A lane

parallel with the garden on the outside of its stiff laurel fence led conveniently round to the wood.

What, Rolf had asked Peter Nolan a few days ago, would happen if someone claimed to use the ancient path?

Nolan had replied that he would get out his old stepladder—almost as ancient and unsafe as the crossing of the ford—and help the wayfarer over the fence into the meadow.

Rolf had then suggested it might be a woman. What then?

But Mr. Nolan would not be drawn.

No lady would do anything like that, he was sure. No real lady. If she did, he would have to give way; he would cut a gap in his fence, thus restoring the old right-of-way . . .

FROM his window as he lay in bed Rolf could see the moonlight on the brook, where the moving waters, surging round the ford, showed up white like collars of foam. It was the last thing at which he looked before falling asleep.

Round about five o'clock he was disturbed by the country noises inevitable at dawn—feathering, preening, twittering sounds, a red glow upon one window and a long patch of sunlight outside the other one, on the grassy slope beyond the brook. Regularly he had professed an eagerness to watch this first fluttering of the birds, but he had never shaped at doing so. Their behaviour was more an affair of lively chatter than of song. They had paired, their eggs were already laid, they blinked in the light, skipped out on to the branches but did not venture far: life was something rather private just now. . .

The sleeper did not even turn over.

But he murmured something which could have been interpreted as 'Good evening.'

It was a greeting to the monk.

Originally four persons figured in this dream, but the

fourth, Mr. Nolan, left after cutting a gap in his garden hedge for Polly—who had claimed the use of the old right-of-way!

The other was the monk.

All three were by the stile.

Polly had apparently come over from Alderlow for the day and had met the monk by appointment—though much against his will. Now she wanted him to go with her into the wood. But he was reluctant to do so: and he was repeating to himself all the time, as a sort of ritual:

“Do not walk with Polly in the wood. Do not walk . . .”

He was willing to walk around it, or would contemplate it, in her company, from any chosen angle. But that was all. To reach this stile the pair had crossed the brook by the ford, where Polly almost fell into the water. In helping her from boulder to boulder the monk had nearly broken his vow of chastity.

Hence his distress.

A tall, lean, dark, disconsolate figure he stood motionless at the stile, and returned Rolf's greeting but did not look at him, keeping his watchful eyes on Polly. He would have recognised Rolf anywhere, he said. Chiefly by his right ear, which was so much like the left.

Rolf felt at both ears and was surprised to find this true. It had not occurred to him before. And he thanked the monk, who spoke to him again.

“You know the nightingale, of course?”

Rolf replied that he had heard of the bird but had not yet heard it.

“It taught the blackbird its notes,” the monk told him, and asked: “The cuckoo?”

“Yes.”

“It sings as it flies. . . And the lark?”

"Oh, yes."

"It sings as it climbs," said the monk, who was now looking at him more directly, keeping Polly in view only out of the corners of his eyes.

Then Polly, who was very pleased because Mr. Nolan had acknowledged her to be a perfect lady, took up the catechism. She asked Rolf whether he knew the wild anemone, which had a small white flower. But so had the wild strawberry, and there were also white violets, not to be confused.

"Bluebells?" she asked, and told him they were like corn, but short and, of course, *blue*.

"Quite," agreed Rolf.

"Quite blue," said Polly, who knew where all these were growing. Cowslips, too: a great bed of cowslips.

It was now Rolf's turn to speak, and in lightest, happiest tone he addressed Polly:

"In a child freedom of fancy is the gift of God: in a youth, after the birth of manhood, it is the Devil's."

Polly's face beamed.

"Is that an epigram?" she asked. "I adore them." Her appreciation was charming.

"Has it escaped your notice, Polly —?"

"Has what escaped my notice, darling?"

Rolf looked over his shoulder swiftly. But the monk had vanished, had seized this opportunity to steal off back to his cell.

"—that among all living creatures," Rolf continued, "man is the only one in whom the gift of caressing the female of his kind has at all developed?"

This flummoxed poor Polly and her face fell.

She laid her finger across her lips, pondering deeply.

In deep thought Polly kept her finger on her lips, as if invoking silence, in this serene and pleasant spot, while she

thought this subject out.

"Among the animals, Polly, there is no romance."

"None," said Polly. "Aren't you deep? Aren't you *beautifully* deep!"

"Unless," the now delighted Rolf qualified his positive statement, "their way of giving mutual comfort and warmth is in some measure romantic."

"They *do* keep each other warm," agreed Polly. "Aren't you a head aching philosopher! My head is simply *splitting*."

"Polly, darling!"

The blissful boy took Polly round the waist.

They left the stile behind, following the cart-track until they reached the arches of the wood, seeking its dimmest interior.

\* \* \* \*

IN so far as the imagination of Mrs. Nolan, wife to the asparagus grower, could reach up to heaven and descend down to hell, she could take in a vast amount of territory. But in mundane matters—such as Rolf's late return home—her conjectures overnight had been confined to the environs of Barns. She was bound always to return to one inquisitive point:

Wherever had the lad been?

At daylight she heard him go across the bedroom for a glass of water, and knock his glass, with a loud ring, against the washbowl: and she could not tell whether she had been awake two seconds or two hours. Her wakefulness seemed to have lasted the whole night. Nevertheless her husband, who rarely woke her when he rose at dawn, had achieved the miracle again, for he was gone. She could hear him moving about in the yard.



Softly he called out to her from under the window :

"Mother, has anyone seen that little bag of fertiliser ? I seem to recollect there was some left."

"Yes . . ." She got up and ran to the window. "We threw it away. It was mouldy." She said *we*, though there was no one else : thus obtaining the aid of some unknown sharer in her fall from his good graces : unable to bear it alone.

"Mouldy ! Oh, mother !" The fertiliser, a very special brand, was no more likely to grow mouldy than well-kept vinegar.

She heard her husband sigh as he crossed the yard.

But he would get over it. It was only a little bag, and there was very little in it when she had emptied it—to make a floorcloth of it. It had made a perfect floorcloth. She wondered whether to use it again today, trusting that he would not notice it, or to hide it for a few days. Unhappily it now lay on the copper in the kitchen ; it would stare him in the face if he happened to go ferreting around there for anything else.

This decided her not to get back into bed for a few extra minutes : though bed, when she had it to herself, was the best place to plan out her whole day's work. Now she was up she would stay up, and get dressed.

The little woman's busy mind grasped at all sorts of things at once. . . Rolf, the floorcloth, the whereabouts of some newly-darned stockings she had meant to wear, young Edward Penn. Ever since young Penn had gone away to be a monk, three years ago, his mother had been upset beyond all bearing. One hardly knew which to feel for most, Ned or his mother. But whichever way one looked at it, Mrs. Penn ought to have gone over to Monks Vale to see her boy, how-

ever much it upset her. Or else she should have arranged for somebody else to go.

Ah! Here were the stockings, exactly where she had put them, under the old rocking-chair cushion.

She sat down on the rocking-chair.

It was the lowest chair in the house, easily the most comfortable for putting one's stockings on.

The new floorcloth would make a good stocking bag—if she washed it thoroughly. “You are for ever saying we need a little stocking bag, Peter”—rehearsing what she would say if her husband unexpectedly confronted her, the wet fertiliser bag in his hand. Then she drew on the other stocking, and shook her grey head, with its wisps of hair, and its bald streaks, as one shakes off unwanted thoughts. She washed and dressed quickly and went downstairs and promptly hid the floorcloth.

Next she fed a robin which was waiting outside.

“THAT bird, Rolf,” the gardener remarked dryly at breakfast, “will be a grandfather before you set eyes on it.” By this time Mr. Nolan had put in a good spell of work in his orchard.

His wife, in a mollifying tone, intervened :

“It is sometimes the hen robin, father.”

“A grandmother, then,” retorted Nolan.

Robustly he finished off his meal with a large piece of toast at a mouthful, while Rolf was only beginning his porridge. And he went out into the yard again. Mrs. Nolan was pumping up water from the deep indoor well. She came into the kitchen with the full bucket in her hand. And as if she had drawn, besides water, some moral support by her vigorous action at the well, she said to Rolf :

"There is more porridge in the pan. You will be losing all your bright looks again if you keep such late hours. I'm sure Christina——"

"No. I was not with Christina. I got as far as the monastery."

"Bless my life!"

She put down her bucket on the stone floor with a splash, a big splash which ordinarily she would have wiped up at once. But she was at a loss what to do about it, for lack of her floorcloth. Her husband was in and about the place every minute. If she brought out her cloth, and he recognised it as his fertiliser bag, he might be still more hurt because she had deceived him. She let the splash stay, and looked up from it at Rolf as he talked and ate at the same time, and whose single sentence to describe the monk he had met at the monastery told her who, exactly, it was.

"He was tall, Mrs. Nolan, tall—with a wonderful voice, and, I am sure, rather young."

"It must have been old Mrs. Penn's boy."

She put up her hand to her wrinkled forehead: she let the bucket handle, which she had held all the time in her other hand, fall back on to its rim with a loud clang.

"Poor Ned!" said Mrs. Nolan. "I wish we had known you were going to see him. We heard only yesterday that his mother wasn't going. I should like to have sent my love to him. And I'm sure Christina . . ."

OLD Mrs. Penn was a widow.

A dear old woman who always wore the same queer little old-fashioned bonnet, Mrs. Nolan said.

She had never got over her son's renunciation of the world. During his first year at Monks Vale she was for ever sending him parcels, small oddments—a clean collar, a piece of pie,

home-baked cakes with the message that they were straight out of the oven. Then she heard that these things did not reach him, Ned wasn't allowed to have them, and she stopped. But once in a while she would break out again and have quite a fit of sending. Her trick, Mrs. Nolan said, was to wait until the Alderlow coach—which always stopped opposite her cottage gate—was on its last minute : then she would come running out, poke her parcel into the postillion's hands, and run indoors in case it was handed back to her.

Rolf asked : "What happens to the cakes ?"

Mrs. Nolan believed the heads of the monastery ate them, shared them out : they would surely never let such good baking go stale. Old Mrs. Penn was well known for her pastry. Ned, she said, used to be very fond of his mother's cakes.

Rolf finished his breakfast and stood by the table.

"Oh, yes, Christina knows him," Mrs. Nolan said. "Or she knew him before he went to be a monk. But he isn't Ned Penn any longer. They gave him the name of a saint. He is called Friar Hugh. Though, of course," she added, contemplating the splash of water on the stone floor, "that doesn't change him ! But you'd better ask father about that."

MR. NOLAN was eager to be off.

He was afraid that his asparagus would run to seed in the warm sun, and on reaching the allotment they quickly settled down to work. The half-grown shoots of the night before were ready for cutting soon after breakfast ; the new shoots of today, which had poked above the soil at sunrise, would be ready to be gathered by noon. One had to be continually on the watch over the wide spread of beds.

"Here's a tall one, Mr. Nolan."

Nolan would come along with his sharp jack-knife : and he sometimes shook his head,

Nobody could see into them from any other part of the monastery and the monk inside could not see over his own fence, or wall. The most creditable plants grew in them, with climber fruit trees on the south wall. The monks grew a wonderful quantity of their own green food : they bound books and had their own carpentry sheds, as well as a boot and shoe shop. They all wore heavy boots, but barefoot, without socks. A good many of them, those who took the chief vows, were forbidden to speak to each other.

THAT was where Mr. Nolan had broken off, had begun to get his asparagus ready for the market.

He counted up the bundles.

He cast his eyes over the allotment, judging afresh, perhaps, the progress of all it contained. Perhaps he also thought that there was no reason to preserve, as a secret from Rolf, what all the village had known for the last three years.

" 'Twas always my belief," he said with a sweet and frank smile, "that young Penn and my niece would have married some day—if he hadn't gone into the monastery."

## XII

I AM about to die, father prior. I am about to die."

"My son, you belong to God, and the children of God do not die."

"I am as one already dead, father prior. Death has taken me by the hand," the monk pursued, in this crisis of his despair.

"I beg, I enjoin, I command you to take care!" The prior's words pitched in the key of an urgent plea, and he raised his voice still more. "There is a soul in jeopardy!" He cried this as if referring to some independent soul not the monk's, which the monk was endangering.

"I have prayed until my knees and the stones themselves are worn."

"And God, who hears all, has heard you."

"God, who reads the hearts of men, has read all that is in my breast," Friar Hugh returned passively.

THIS conversation took place in the prior's study. It had been preceded by an interview between the two in the younger man's cell. The prior had visited him there during the morning, after his nerve-storm on the bench in front of the monastery. In his cell the monk had paced to and fro most of the night. Then he had asked to be taken into the chapel, where he had risen abruptly from his knees in the middle of a prayer.

The older man stood with his back to the window; his tall, spare figure was framed in the light. The words he had uttered carried some weight of compassion, mingled with a measure of stern, and doubtless considered, rebuke. The

youthful friar was wagging his head from side to side, as if beyond the pale of help, human or divine.

The prior continued to urge him to eat a little food. A few biscuits, if nothing else. And to drink a little wine.

"Drink a little wine," the superior said, kindly. "Drink a little wine."

That was what the old monk who had escorted him from the cell had begged of him : "Drink some wine, little brother" — though Friar Hugh's lank figure was much the taller of the two. And after they had ascended a high stairway, and were approaching the prior's door : "Forty-three years have I been here, little brother. Forty-three. And each year I have pined less and less for the common world. It would break my heart to enter it again. I would rather fling myself headlong from the father prior's window. But here we are at his door. God give you his blessing."

Now, outside in the corridor, the old fellow coughed as he waited, seated on his polished oak bench by the wall.

The two men inside the room heard this cough.

The prior picked up, and lightly shook, a small hand-bell, customarily in use as a paper weight.

"Brother John," he said to the robed figure who poked his bald head in at the door, "retire farther off, please. I will ring the larger bell for your attendance here later. You will hear it quite plainly in the further ante-room."

Brother John filled the office of doorkeeper.

In one particular, the priory was like the very much larger library, which it adjoined. Many of its walls were lined with books—not bare, like most of the other interior walls of the monastery. Between two of the bookshelves in the study there stood, on a shelf, a small and beautiful statue of the Virgin carved in wood. Many of the volumes were old manuscripts beyond price, hand-copied by the monks of past ages

and since bound by the monks of this generation. The prior could look out of his back windows across the sea ; in front he enjoyed the seclusion and peace of the cloisters.

He was wearing his dark robes.

From his high cheek-bones to his lean deep chin were dark lines, and he had tireless grey eyes below a high ridge of brow. Edward Penn's face, on the other hand, was broader and his eyes, naturally very dark and sparkling, were withdrawn and pensive. In his long grey robe and apron, and the heavy hood at his neck, he looked clumsy. A still, bowed and forlorn figure, he sat loosely sideways at the table of heavy oak, on a chair so smooth that he was slipping off it. His right leg, bent, was kept rigid, pressing his heavy-booted foot against the floor.

He had asked to be allowed to dig.

But in the prior's opinion a quiet walk in the secluded avenues of the monastery garden was the wiser course.

"A little walk, a little prayer," the superior suggested. "Meditation in an atmosphere of things that are simple and beautiful. The lupins are a spectacle this year. In particular the blue ones. They are in five shades . . . and it is a task to choose the most excellent."

With sudden fervour the younger man crossed himself. In the secrecy of his heart he had murmured an execration, putting a curse upon all lupins—in their five different shades.

A question hovered on the tip of the prior's tongue. But he did not ask it. He would have liked to ask the monk whom he had waited for in front of the monastery, yesterday, and also upon what he had built his hopes. His mother was not to be expected. So much the prior knew, and he knew that the monk knew it. The old woman had written to say so ; her letter was still in the prior's desk. She said the journey by coach would shake her up too much. She had sent



her love and a prayer for Ned's health, and trusted that by this time he had found good companions who made him feel at home in the monastery. She hoped to be well enough to come next year, and promised to send a pie as soon as the gooseberries were fit to pick. And she concluded :

"Tell Ned I hadn't the heart to write to him, so write to you instead."

In spite of all this, Friar Hugh had paced the forecourt apparently in the highest spirits. He had sauntered to the gate a score of times, gazing up the hill, cocking his head to catch the sound of the tramp of horses, the rumble of the mail-coach, the note of the postillion's horn.

Then this vision had befallen him.

And the priest, who was familiar with the foundations of hysteria, was not surprised.

"Upon my word, I am filled with wonder !" Edward Penn burst out, shaking himself. He repeated this expression twice. Upon his word ! He allowed his crooked elbow to straighten out and the hand, in which he had been supporting his head, to fall with a loud smack on the polished table.

The prior stared at him.

And to this new outburst he replied in a chillier tone than he had used so far. His dark brows, which were not very wide, had shot upwards, but he had not yet—as he could do—knitted them until they almost joined at the little dark seam at the top of his nose. It was a fine strong nose, rather less ascetic than his face, which it nevertheless suited. He was best seen in profile, seen in a passing glimpse—wearing, say, his dark beret, on the seat of his high dog-cart, reins in his muscularly thin hands.

"At what," he asked deliberately, poising forward, head on one side, already listening, "do you wonder ?"

Bolt upright on his slippery chair, after that unconventional slap on the table, Edward Penn had not since moved.

"That my head has held together ; for my heart has burst," he said. "I can taste it in my mouth."

He made a slight savouring noise with his lips, licking them.

"Yes, burst ; it has the flavour," he informed the prior, as one telling of a singular discovery, "of lime and salt."

With salt the prior was familiar, and with lime-fruit. But he chose to ask, in a restrained voice, for a further particular. "The lime that grows on trees, friar . . . o<sup>d</sup> the lime that burns like Hell ?"

"The lime like the mortar on the walls of my cell, father prior. I once ate a piece to pass the time," replied Ned Penn.

Now, the prior could knit his brows, justifiably.

Those wings of a hovering moth came together at the little dark seam in the middle, which had deepened. But they were kept high, there was no frown ; their lofty arch, the peering eyes sharp as flint, steady as two fixed lights, revealed an unfretful curiosity. He was vaguely curious to know something more about this earnest and intelligent young man's emotional history. But the question really uppermost in his mind was not that.

It was this : How much wall has he eaten ?

Effortlessly, he banished both streams of thought, so oddly assorted. His expression dropped. He came back to the mortar and the broken heart.

"Rather an unhappy diet, brother !"

The miserable man did not answer. He did not yet answer, but shifted in his seat, putting both hands up to his big head.

"Father Prior . . ."

"Yes."

"Shall I tell you my problem?"

"I should like to help you."

"Sometimes," said the monk, "when alone in my cell, I feel possessed of strange gifts. I feel that I can evoke from the silence a silence that is still deeper, investing my cell, at the same time, with a still completer solitude."

"Are not such moments," the prior asked, nowise startled, "the moments for prayer?"

"Prayer?" echoed the monk.

"Prayer."

"But how pray, how can one pray, when one feels that one isn't there?"

Meanwhile Brother John had been sitting on his bench in the waiting-room. For how long by the clock he could not have guessed. But he might have computed it, truthfully, as the time of five prayers (one of them said over again by mistake), a good stare out of the window at a little fishing boat under sail, a brief speculation as to whether Friar Hugh would spend the rest of his life in the monastery, and a few flickering memories.

That would have been about accurate.

He sat on, neither patient nor impatient. Time, which was eternal, did not concern him. Yet he had a clear and almost tangible view of it.

It was an affair of today and yesterday.

It was broken up into even periods by the recurrence of Sundays. Then the refectory table was more hospitable, with tankards of beer and talk that was allowed to flow freely. Or by the feast-days which, again, were celebrated with beer or wine.

As a humble brother it fell to him, in his turn, to serve out the beer, and once in a while he would drink off a private

glass. Or it might be wine. In either case there was no sin, for both were plentiful on these appointed days and he rarely fell into gluttony. Such events aside, time was a matter of the four seasons. As for the annual vacation day, well, there was that too, if one wished to bother about it. This free day used to bring him a family visitor or two, once in a while with a friend. Long ago half a dozen at once. With their eternal questions! Never any difference in them. . . Did he like the life? Would he choose to go into a monastery if he had his time over again?

"Yes," he used to tell them, "it is a life of fulfilment"  
Or something like that.

And he would send them away with nods and smiles and sprigs of rosemary. A sprig for each one.

Several years ago—three, he should say—a girl used to go past the monastery gate, regularly every morning. She was young and had the merriest of faces, but her charm did not affect him and he had never troubled even to cross himself as she went by, much less say a prayer. She was, he supposed, cycling to the girls' school a mile beyond the gate.

After a while she began to call out to him :

"Good morning, Brother John."

So she knew his name, he reflected ; and responding with only the slightest bow, he had asked himself :

"Who can have told her that ?"

More and more he kept his back to her—hoeing diligently, trimming his shrubs or weeding the path in the sweet air of the morning ; acknowledging her greetings with a less and even less perceptible bow. A sideways bow, without looking at her.

One morning she rang her bicycle bell. Again she rang it. And when he turned she was looking at him through the

railings with a flush on her cheeks like the bloom of a fresh rose.

What could he do but ask her—

“In what way can I help you, my child?” *My dear*, he had almost said.

“Give me a sprig of rosemary, Brother John!”

She wanted a substantial piece to set in her garden at home. “A good strong shoot, please; one that will be sure to take root. You have plenty.”

After that she had never spoken to him again; she had gone by on her bicycle without even a look. At least, he never caught her looking. His duties changed; he was, for a time, rarely in the forecourt and he contrived to exclude her from his daily thoughts altogether, *almost* altogether. It was easy for him to do so. For he had learned, long ago, to meet the cunning of the devil with a personal cunning of his own. Whenever the fresh face of that girl occurred to his fancy he would substitute another image; he thought of the Blessed Virgin or of Christ on the Cross. And if that did not efface her he thought of something, foul, dead, putrescent.

This was generally successful.

Nevertheless, once or twice the girl had appeared to him in his dreams. Not, indeed, as a visitant to his cell. But with her smiling face pressed to the monastery rails, a greeting on her lips, which were red, causing him to think of the sweetness and also the firmness of cherries.

That was bad enough; but not the worst.

One awful night (it was after a feast-day) Brother John dreamed that he had dug up an entire bush with its roots and a good bucket of soil as well, and made this pretty girl a gift of it. It was a freezing winter's night. Had it been less cold he would have got up to pray. But he lay still on his mattress of straw, huddled in his two blankets. And on to the

end of a few appropriate prayers he added this one of his own :

Lord, my purpose was harmless enough. I am an old man, in whose breast all carnal passion has long since died. I expected nothing in return for my gift of that very small sprig. Besides, the bush is still there, and will bloom again in the spring.

Brother John sat on the bench in the ante-room, still waiting for the father prior to ring his bell. He could have waited there for ever. He scratched his bald head. He felt at his eyebrows, now grown very tough, and stroked them down—unwilling that they should stick up like a couple of horns. He pulled at the virile fringe of grey beard that covered his jaw from ear to ear.

These were gestures of perplexity.

For all the good that particular rosemary bush was now it might just as well, after all, have been given to the girl who used to ride by on her bicycle. It was damaged beyond belief. He had been forced to trim it severely—almost out of existence. Either Friar Hugh must have done it in his outburst of grief, or the boy with whom he had sat talking. Most likely the boy, for it looked as if it had been not only trodden but ridden down. The boy must have dragged his bicycle across it in the dark, there were so many broken pieces strewn about the grass, all on the same side.

Surely, surely it was not done wantonly !

For harbouring, only for one moment, so evil a thought, the old monk crossed himself.

His thoughts wandered again to the girl who had begged the rosemary nearly three years ago. He wondered whether she had set it : and, if so, whether it had taken root and thrived. When first he used to see her she was a girl with a long plait. After a while the plait disappeared, vanished as

completely as if it had been cut off. Then on that morning he had given her the rosemary he discovered what had happened to it. For he had glanced at her swiftly as she turned her back. There was the plait—tucked up at the nape of her neck. It was hidden underneath a broad ribbon tied up to resemble a great butterfly.

As for her hat . . .

Brother John's meditations went off at a tangent.

His rosary hung down beside him. He had stirred on the bench so as to sit up more comfortably against the wall, and this movement caused the beads to drag on the floor. He dipped his hand, took hold of a large bead between his finger and thumb, and reeled off a prayer at full speed, slipping his bead over the loop. As to her hat . . . when she had pressed her face to the rails she was wearing *no* hat. None. Perhaps she was carrying it. For in his mind there was the clearest picture of a hat which was something to marvel at. It was like the top of an enormous Christmas pie.

The old fellow nodded, dozed on his bench, coughed—which wakened him—dashed alertly through a prayer, slipped another bead on to the told row. In and out of his somewhat abstracted vision floated Christina's astonishing hat—decked with a burden of summer flowers. Among them there was lilac of several colours, and rosebuds, and—there for a certainty was the prior's bell, making noise enough to wake the dead.

SHORTLY before ringing his bell the prior had made a last exhortation to his youngest monk. Friar Hugh was not only very much overwrought, but he was at an obvious spiritual cross-roads, and the prior had begged him not to dispose of his own soul, as it were, out of hand. The monk had risen to his feet. His inward stress made him sway slightly, at his

considerable height ; and this gave rise to a steady rustling sound, made by his robes. Outwardly he was now calm, his face downcast.

"You must believe me, father prior, when I tell you——"

"Brother," said the prior, interrupting, "it is not for me to disbelieve any human creature who tells the truth about himself. But which of us is able to do so ? Half the suffering of mankind lies at the door of earnest self-deceit. It is the next-of-kin to misdirected zeal."

"Earnest self-deceit !" The younger man repeated the phrase, pondering its significance.

"Earnest self-deceit, brother. It is the Hideous One's most cunning trick. When an honest man says he goes in quest of truth he gives himself the lie. For truth is not elusive, is not hidden, it stares mankind in the face—from the Cross, and in the gentle eyes of Christ's Holy Mother. Turn"—said the prior, with ever so slight a gesture—"turn round, and you will see."

The monk turned.

He faced, on its shelf on the wall, the small and beautiful statue of the gentle Virgin . . .

"I was about to say, father prior," said the monk after an interval, "that all initiative is dead within me. I can do nothing."

"Which," the rejoinder came, again more considerately, "may be something to be thankful for."

The younger man then added : "For the moment I can do nothing ! Nothing !"

Most of this time the prior had fingered without ceasing a sacred pendant at his breast, a small silver crucifix. But his glance went frequently to the wall, and there came to rest on that little statue of the Virgin on her shelf. He may have



suspected, as one who had ever sought the true and the good, that Friar Hugh had found himself humbled, brought to nought, in the way of all flesh, by other and less holy visions such as haunt the minds of men.

"Brother," he once more addressed the monk, "let us not seek to anticipate the will of God. Any one of us, any one of us——" He dropped his voice, coming, in his thoughts, very near to himself. "Any one of us may feel, in a moment of elusion that God himself has closed both eyes and ears to his nearer approach." He grasped his crucifix with dispassionate force. It might have been a gesture of the deepest feeling.

It was then that he rang his bell, again and again ; and at last Brother John came running and coughing.

"Pardon, father prior," the flurried old man said. And when he had got his breath : "I was in a stupor."

"A what, brother ?"

"A stupor, father prior."

"What particular kind of stupor ?"

"Of adoration, father prior."

### XIII

AT heart the prior was a benign man. He had been a brilliant student, an astute lecturer, was reputed as a scholar. But as a Christian philosopher he had grown without ripening. Long ago his hope had been to become a bishop. An eminent colleague had once said of him, cynically :

"His eyebrows are against him. They are too mobile ; they belie his invincibility."

Perhaps too, without knowing it, he was a victim of earnest self-deceit. However, in this office of immense trust he carried on with austere rigour. And the monks in his care lacked no opportunity for the achievement of their destiny, human and divine, which the monastic calling can afford. At times the prior must have dwelt upon his stewardship with a natural awe. Awe of its twofold character. For he was at once the temporal and spiritual warden of this community of men, warden of their bodies and of their souls.

But his point of view, his feelings, whether of thankfulness or of frustration : any wish to be elsewhere, in the world outside these towering walls : all this, with any ashes from some fire of love, if love there had ever been : love well lost, or grimly, even lightly, put aside—all of it, if it had any lingering substantial existence, was hidden in the depths of his heart.

His mother was proud of her middle-aged son.

She had written to him when he became a prior. She said how nice it must feel, after all these years, to have a monastery of his own. She reminded him over again how anxious she

used to feel about him in his own early days as a young friar, so lonely, in his cell. She supposed that now he would surely have a fine big room.

The old lady came to see him.

She had arrived by coach and was allowed to sleep in one of the guest-houses outside, and early next morning he let her peer through the great door into the cloistered interior.

She said, advancing her foot an inch :

"I suppose that is the garden. I have often wanted to see a monastery garden."

The prior smiled.

"So you have often said, mother."

"And I still would like to, Tommy." She called him by his boyhood name. Perhaps few besides her remembered it.

"I'm sorry, mother."

"That wistaria you spoke of in your letter, climbing round the trellis outside your study . . ."

"Yes, mother."

"You don't think I could have just one glance at it ?"

"No, mother."

"Not one peep ?"

"Not one, mother."

The prior was affectionately tantalising, after the manner of a good son. But as a good priest he stood his ground, and barred her way.

"Step back a bit, mother ; take a good pace back. You are in monastic territory. No woman is allowed . . ."

He patted her affectionately on the shoulder.

She was quite complimented.

"What ! An old creature like me. You think any of your monks would give me a second look !" She raised her thick walking stick, on which she had been leaning, as if to beat

him. And she continued to look past him, through the archway.

"Tell me where the library is."

He said the library could be reached by a long corridor leading from his own room, part of the way underground. It was in the middle part of the grounds, and had a very lofty ceiling on the inside of a great dome. She would be able to see the dome from the top of the coach when she went back, if she looked downhill between the two big chestnut trees.

Next she asked about the shoemaker's shop, and he gave her a good idea of its position. It was over in the right-hand corner, where the sea, half a mile distant, came up the long cove. The carpenter's shop was close by. Both these workshops faced the sea, and thus the activities were hardly ever heard by other monks engaged in meditation or at prayer.

"And the stable where you keep your horse?"

"Just inside here on the left. It is screened by a laurel hedge." The prior pointed with his forefinger, bent at right angles to his wrist, through the arch.

"Only just inside?"

"Just inside."

"Can't I see your horse?"

"Not unless I bring him out here, mother."

The old dame sat down on the bench on the left of the great door. "That's all right, Tom," she said at last, as if she had only been putting her son through a test. "I believe you that it's there." She puffed a little after the exertion of her interest, and from standing up so long. She asked about the flower gardens, with their lupins, delphiniums, and their wonderful rock plants, and the roses which climbed along more than sixty yards of wall; about the kitchen gardens, and the hidden little gardens tended by those monks who shut them-

selves up for long spells of silence and solitude. But it was not these things, really, she would have liked so much to see. It was the chair her son sat in, his reading lamp, his bed, the outlook from his window. . . .

He saw her off by the coach.

Pausing on the step, before going inside, she produced a small package done up in blue sugar-paper and neatly tied. It contained five lumps of sugar.

"For the horse," she said.

There was a piece from each of his five nephews and nieces, the children of his sister, three of whom the prior had never seen. He was amused and secretly touched, and he asked that his blessing be conveyed to the children. Then as the coach moved off he stood at the top of the hill and raised his hand in a farewell salute that was a further blessing. In reply the old woman raised the head of her stick in her clenched hand and shook it at him once more as if she would beat him with it.

The prior walked slowly down the steep hill. He pursed his lips to repress a smile at an isolated thought detached from his talk with her whom he had just now sped on her way.

"A monastery of my own!" he repeated drily.

Such human pride tickled him, but at the same time he felt bound to shudder at the very idea of it. In his left hand, somewhat absently held out before him, was the small blue package of sugar, upon which his eyes lighted afresh. Continuing his descent of the hill, he began to unwrap the package. So far as he recollected he had made only a passing reference, in a single letter, to the existence of his horse. But the point had evidently been seized on. His mother must have told his sister, who had told her children, who had sent this gift of the five lumps of sugar. The lumps were exactly equal. Doubtless they had been chosen with care—each child

wishing the horse to be no less satisfied with its own piece than with the piece of any of the other four.

The prior found himself trying to remember the name and sex of his sister's fifth infant. It was either William or Bertha. At any rate it wasn't Thomas, who, he was positive, was the eldest and named after himself.

Absorbed by this problem, he re-entered the monastery.

## XIV

ONE afternoon Rolf accompanied Christina to Little Melliton, where they were to take tea with the girl's relatives. This hamlet lay over on the far side of the wood which had been the scene of Rolf's dream some weeks ago. The dream of his walk with Polly. As the lane opened out on the right and the path crossed the neighbouring heath the memory of that vivid episode of the night flitted in and out of his mind. He found himself casting surreptitious glances into the wood for the carpets of bluebells, anemones, Polly's great bed of cowslips. But their season was over.

They had stopped to gather honeysuckle, and Christina, who was a little in front, called out to Rolf :

"This honeysuckle is the colour of the sun !"

"Or of butter," he shouted back.

"Or of honey," she laughed, and threw down another piece behind her.

The hot air was laden with its scent. The sun was shining brilliantly. The middle of June had arrived. Thunder hovered in the distance among invisible clouds. They had both heard it, and each called the other's attention to it at intervals.

"Do you hear that ?"

"There it is again."

The sky was a hard metallic blue. Its depth was filled with a bewildering sheen that produced an effect, actually, of intense sparkle. Christina was wearing a large straw sun-hat with a high poke-brim caught in at the sides and tied beneath her chin. Rolf had tied a handkerchief over his head. Beads

of sweat stood on his forehead. His gaze roamed the sky until his eyes recoiled.

Promptly he sneezed.

"That's funny !" said Christina, who was looking round at him. "It makes me do the same thing. Only not so much."

"What does ?" Rolf asked after his third sneeze.

"Looking up."

"Oh, you mean sneezing ! I was looking for the thunder-clouds. They must be somewhere."

"Yes, they are somewhere, right enough. Like those sheep and the dog in the field of the echo. You remember ?"

They came to a wonderful patch of wild strawberries. The ground was spattered with them. They could not help crushing them with their feet, and ate as fast as they could pick them, unable to choose decisively the best spot ; they were so plentiful. To Rolf they were a new kind of fruit. He had never seen them before. First he thought them rather tasteless ; next somewhat bitter. But he went on eating them as if they were luscious. Christina was eating and chattering at the same time. She said they could be made into jam, or stewed. But sugar and cream brought out their flavour best. Then she cried :

"But wait until the wild raspberries are ripe !" She said they were the best.

And it occurred to Rolf that always there was something new, and that the seasons were a progression of blooms, vegetables, fruits. The mildest night frost was feared. The gentlest rain after a few dry days was something to make folk smile. He had counted a dozen almost identical comments about a drenching downpour that had lasted, one morning, nearly two hours :

"Grand drop of rain today !"

Everyone had said this in a most cheerful voice.



They left the wild strawberries, returned to the path, gathering the honeysuckle together again. The girl's face bore an expression of companionable grace as she spoke.

"Perhaps you'll tell me," she said, "why you keep throwing such looks into the wood there? Nothing is going to leap out and bite you!"

The words on her lips were drowned in a squawking commotion. In a flutter without warning a bird of brilliant plumage had started up almost at their feet, rising from the tall grass. Its long and elegant neck was pushed well forward, its feet stretched out and lying back up against its body. This burnished, frightened beauty was followed by its hen, a grey and smaller bird with a much less boisterous cry. The two birds flew parallel with the ground, very swiftly but with half-pauses, hesitation; they would have stopped if they had dared. And a moment later a young creature like a tall thrush, or like a young and graceful chicken, but finer feathered, came running out on to the path, crossing it at full speed to disappear in a cluster of ferns.

Christina turned red with guilt.

"Look! Look! We've startled the whole family."

"Why," Rolf asked in surprise, "did that young one rush off in exactly the opposite direction? It must have been more upset by the terrible clatter its father made than by us. By Jove!" he went on, "if that isn't another instance of fear learned from one's elders . . . even among the birds!"

"Yes, all the animals are the same," rejoined Christina. "Young rabbits are never as frightened as the older ones. Kittens don't run from a dog at first. Calves are often quite forward creatures. And you have noticed the lambs. They can be as bold as brass. It is because their mothers are so ready to face up to you. It is the funniest thing in the world

to see an old ewe turn and stamp her feet as much as to tell you to be off out of her meadow. I've seen five or six stamp most indignantly, like real old dowagers. Then the lambs have imitated them. But Mr. Denby, the farmer who has that fine bull you're so fond of, Rolf, won't have it that the stamping stands for courage. He says it is simply the warning for the tribe ; like the rabbits when they pound their feet on the ground to warn those in the burrows below to stay there. But it seems to me," the girl said, "there is more to it than that." And she went on : "Sometimes I've stood quite still in front of a flock of sheep with their lambs, and if the one in front, a bit cheekier than the rest, has stamped, many of the others have followed suit, and they have all come a bit nearer."

Rolf was still excited by the flight of the cock pheasant. He hoped they might come across another one without startling it. Christina said this was nearly impossible. If they were to see one it would be either on the run or in flight. Cock pheasants were not fond of human beings.

Rolf stepped out with a bigger stride.

"Let us hurry off the heath," he said, "then those two older birds we saw will come back sooner for that small one."

"You needn't rush away like that," Christina answered in his trail. "We are turning into this lane here."

Rolf swung sharply round, because of some inflexion in her voice. She was smelling at the honeysuckle, but he asked her what she was laughing at.

"Tell me why you laughed just then."

Her reply was an evasion. "I don't think it could be called laughing," she answered him, with an effort keeping her face straight.

"Was it because I said the older birds would return ?"

"No; most likely they will."

"Because I looked funny taking a big stride?"

"No. Do you look funny when you take a big stride? Oh, Rolf, I was only smelling at the honeysuckle!"

They had turned into the lane and were dropping down to Little Melliton, whose square old church tower stood out below amid a congregation of haystacks and thatched roofs. Not for some minutes was the church to begin dislocating itself, gradually in their descent of the hill, from the homesteads and cottages, and to appear inside its own old wall, immemorably alone among its tombstones and green and mossy mounds . . .

There was a sudden burst of laughter in the lane, with welcoming cries. Two fine girls had stepped out of hiding, one very fair, the other dark. As much as two such lasses could, they had, on hearing the approach of footsteps and one familiar voice, pushed themselves out of sight.

"Christy . . . don't say you stopped on the way to gather all that honeysuckle! There isn't plenty you could have had here on the farm, of course!"

Laughter and talk intermingled.

"Betty!" Christina cried, "how you've grown! Shirley, she's caught you up and passed you. I always said she would."

"Thank you, Christina!" ironically came from the bigger girl.

"Well, 'tis true, I did. Aren't you a picture of health?" And turning to the darker sister, who was the elder, as Rolf by this time had made out: "Isn't it rather early to be fattening the turkeys for Christmas?"

"Christy!"

"She's a great big fat wench!" agreed Shirley. "She weighs over seven and a half score. She used to push me out of

bed three times a week, until mother was forced to let us go into the two beds in the spare room. I'd told father I'd rather sleep by myself in the shippon."

After being introduced Rolf fell into the rear, musing on Betty's weight. He brought it to pounds, but had not managed to convert it to stones when they reached the bottom of the lane and Christina turned round to ask him :

"Didn't I tell you they were two fine wenches ?"

"Seven twenties," he answered, laughing, "that is, 140 pounds. Add ten for the half score and that's 150. Now what are the odd pounds to be added on ?"

Betty flung up her flaxen head.

"I'm a hundred and forty-six pounds exactly, since you want to know. My goodness !" cried this big fair girl. "The cows will have been in the shippon twenty minutes !"

They hurried round by the church.

The farm gate was across the road on the other side of the churchyard. A flock of geese barred their path and made gasping noises at them, screeching when they were driven off. A trail of dung marked the path of the cows from the field gate to the shippon door. The last cow's rump was still visible, its tail curled into a half-hoop as it added contentedly to the pile there. Betty ran off in haste for her milking buckets. Hens were clucking, uncertain which was next to walk, one foot off the ground, or were pecking for gravel ; a crowing cock was posed on the top of the empty dog kennel and paused in its uproar to drop its spatter of dung down the side of the roof.

"You're a grand pair of maidens to leave the farm like this !" cried a far from angry voice. "For a whole hour or more." The girls' mother, who was half the size of her daughters, had at the sound of their voices come out to the

kitchen door. This diminutive figure was thin, active and worn, and wore on her grey head a faded woolly mob-cap. She was flourishing a dog whip :

"See . . . this is for you, Betty. Where is she ? The cows can stand dripping milk all over the shippon floor for all that girl cares, when there's a man in the wind. Come in, my dear . . ." to Christina. "How are the bees and the asparagus this year ? It's nice to see you again ! And you, young man . . ." warmly to Rolf, whose hand she had taken in both hers, which were small and bony. Her very alert eyes fussed all over Rolf's face ; they took in his stature and girth, his red russet jersey and rolled-up sleeves, his grey flannel trousers and white canvas shoes—a survey ending in a fond gesture almost of reproof.

"My dear," she said afterwards, shaking her head, "it is not hard to see you come from a town ! But step down to Betty in the shippon, and say I'll be sending someone along to take the milking from her. I'll be bound she was hoping to find it half done !"

In the cobble-stoned farmyard there again were the geese. They would not move aside when Rolf tried to go round them, or divide when he advanced with an air of boldness and a loudly uttered :

"Shoo !"

Indeed, their outcry was wilder, their approach to him more assured. He likened this affair to his old encounter with the sexton, who, he had since told himself, ought to have been met gaily with an easy-going joke. He ought to have got through the sexton's crustiness somehow. He pretended to laugh, but it was a wry laugh, and the geese did not share his amusement.

Rolf tried a most casual wave of his arm and would have

marched through. But the goosy phalanx, though it broke, as quickly re-formed.

"Shoo! Shoo!"

His voice, absurdly amiable, carried no conviction to the geese. At first he had been able to hear the spurting of the milk into Betty's pail, but now the uproar was too great. In the far corner of the yard two turkeys were strutting to and fro. One of them stopped and turned its back on him : he became singularly conscious, in this present dilemma, of the attractive spread of its tail. It was like a fan. The other turkey continued its parade, dropping its wings to the ground like two girders. Very likely the turkeys were making a noise, too, but what kind Rolf couldn't tell.

"You'd better send those geese about their business!"

There was Betty at the shippon door.

He opened his eyes and mouth in a laugh of surprised recognition, and went straight up to her as if the geese hadn't been there at all. They melted noisily on either side of him. "How amusing those turkeys are," he said to Betty. "The way they drop their girders as they march along."

In the shippon, they heard a clank of harness from the stable next door.

"Ah! That must be Tom," Betty said to him. "I reckon he should have about seen to his horses by now. Now's the time," she raised her voice hopefully, "to go in and tell him what mother said. Mother may think he's not come in yet, and he'll be away home for his tea before we can stop him."

With all this Betty seemed very pleased, as if Rolf had connived with her in some little plot. Withdrawing her face from the flank of the cow she was milking, she said, winking :

"I dare say Tom gave you a dirty look."

But Rolf said the cowman had seemed quite unconcerned. Tom had promised to come along right away.

It was cooler in the shippon than outside. But close to the cattle there was an animal warmth, infused with the smell of milk. The milk spurted in rapid white jets from the udder of the red cow. It did not splash up in the pail, but hit the shallow level of the milk already there with a sort of dead accuracy and came up in froth and spume.

"You were right," said Betty suddenly. "The turkeys do look funny when they hide their feet. When I was little I used to say they were sailing on dry land. But they can be a great deal more awkward, more frightening than geese, when they take it into their heads. Geese are just silly. But a turkey can be wicked."

Rolf said nothing, and Betty, remembering his face, went on: "I was once chased all round the yard by a turkey, when I was about ten."

"What did you do?"

"Run!"

"Did you climb the gate?"

"Head first."

Rolf privately wished he had been there too.

To have rushed heroically to the scene . . . to have grasped the turkey by the neck . . . valiantly holding on; roaring, in the midst of his mortal tussle: "Never mind me!" until the long-stockinged, heels-over-head girl, shaken and a bit bruised, picked herself up safely on the other side of the gate. Imagined idyll!

But this flashing vision vanished.

On her low three-legged stool Betty seemed to be almost kneeling beside this big red placid cow. She had tucked up her skirt beneath the pinafore thrown over it. The half-filled pail was gripped between her knees.

"Mother was awfully cross!" she said.

"With the turkey?"

"No ; with me. . . . You don't know mother !"

This sumptuous daughter of the little old woman with the hollow eyes glanced up at him, but before rising to Rolf's face her attention paused for a second on his jersey, as if examining its colour. He met her refreshing smile, and smiled back. From her knees with the milk-pail between them his own interest passed to the fair column of Betty's neck, then to her small pink ears. Then his gaze lightly came to rest upon her breasts, which were pressed close together inside her linen jacket, which was sleeveless, its top button undone. At her bare arms, too, he had been looking ; and at her busy hands. Those soft breasts moved gently with the movement of her hands.

Betty was shaking her head reminiscently.

To the patient cow which at last had shifted out of line with her bucket, she turned to address a loud and scandalous rebuke :

"Bastard !"

She got up and poured the milk for safety into a larger can, resuming with circumspection, ready for any other movement.

"Mother never liked us to show fear when we were little. She gave me a stick and told me to take a good run at that turkey. I did, and because I got it into a corner and was going to thrash it, she was wilder than ever."

"Why ?"

"Because I wasn't meant to thrash it. I was just to let mother see that I could be the gobbler's boss. She said I would be running away from a hen next. The only thing she'd let us dodge was the old bull." Then more reflectively she added : "Mother was a terror. Up to her last illness."

Rolf was still tickled by Betty's shout at the cow when it had stirred.



"Do you think she understood you?" he asked.

Betty pondered before answering :

"I reckon she did."

"But the exact word . . . when you called it a bastard?"

"Oh! This old soldier? There's nothing like letting her know what you think about her in good time."

"But if you'd yelled at her: 'Darling!' as you yelled at her: 'Bastard!' it would have had just the same effect, I should think."

"Perhaps so. But," the amused girl said, "it wouldn't have been true."

"Why?"

"*Why?*" she imitated him. She flushed slightly after this retaliation, laughed and rose from her stool.

"Try to get another drop from her."

The boy sat down on the warm stool. Posing himself, he tried to imitate the girl's action. The cow stepped away from him.

"*Darling!*" yelled Betty at the cow.

From the little side window a calm voice responded :

"Coming, Miss Betty."

"Tom!" she cried. And as the young cowman came round into the shippon: "Tom, don't dare think I was calling *you!*"

"So I see. . . 'Twas this young gentleman, I daresay."

Chuckling, Tom addressed himself to Rolf, who had stood up and stepped back from the cow. Sitting down on the milking stool the cowman brushed back one shirt sleeve, giving it an extra roll.

"It's not a bit of good lugging at a cow like you'd ring the church bells," he said.

"Tom's the best bell-ringer in the parish," said Betty, pointedly informative, opening his eyes wider.

"'Tis like this you should do it," said the cowman.

"Like which, Tom?"

Betty ran out of the shippon.

The cow, she told Rolf as they raced up the farmyard, was as dry as a heifer. "I'd drained the last drop from her!"

## XV

OVER tea at the long table in the farm kitchen the girls made a joke of Rolf's unquenchable curiosity about Little Melliton, and everyone laughed at the answers they gave him. Their mother was the only one who had a chair at the table. The others sat on two wooden forms. The farmer did not sit up to the table because a leg of his chair had come off. It had given way at breakfast. He could have mended it himself, but he thought the wheelwright would make a better job of it, so it had been taken away. He was a tall man with a sandy moustache and big beard, tired-looking but cheerful and ready to talk. He sat in a rocking-chair sideways at the bottom of the table, where he could see out of the window and reach for his food; and he ate off his knees, using a stool for his cup and saucer. The window looked into the farmyard and was behind Rolf, who had Shirley next to him. The girls' mother did not often join in the talk, except now and again to keep her daughters in manners — as she said, to bring them to their senses. She rebuked them softly, several times, without interrupting the conversation.

"Shirley!" she said more sharply, once.

Shirley had spoken in disparagement of Rolf's weight and strength as against her own. And this dark sister now threw at him the aside:

"You are saved. Wait till after."

Rolf's vagrant fancy flew to some ensuing contest out of doors after tea; he had seen the cut hay lying in long rows in the field above the house. But for this pictured hayfield

frolic he could not be sure which of the two sisters he would prefer ; and he found himself agreeing with Mrs. Boone, their mother, that of all jams black-currant was the nicest with cream.

"Try cream and a little honey," suggested Christina, who sat opposite. "You liked them together the other day." So far she had been talking down the table, chiefly entertaining her uncle, Farmer Boone, who chose this moment to speak up from his rocking-chair.

"Afterwards," he said in a slow voice, with hardly the shadow of a smile, "I'll give him one of my cigars."

'Chorus of warning against the farmer's cigars because they were black and very strong.'

Betty had not yet said much. Her thoughts may still have been in the shippin, or anywhere. But she laughed when the others laughed. Rolf began to address his remarks directly to her father ; and the girls, either from interest or respect, or because of some secret expectation of a retort with some point in it, pricked up their ears. Mr. Boone had said that Little Melliton church was not far short of a thousand years old.

"This same church ?" Rolf jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"It's not on that side ; it's outside the sitting-room window," Betty corrected him ; and from her mother there came an unemphatic caution against rudeness :

"Betty !"

The farmer laughed.

"Oh, no . . . not entirely this same building. Some new parts have been joined on to the older bits. There have even been previous churches. Two, they say. Just as there have been previous parsons."

His wife frowned at this, and said : "Oh, father !" but in amusement ; while Shirley inserted :

"Well, 'tis all true, mother !"

"Have you your own sexton ?" Rolf asked.

"There *is* a sexton," the farmer answered, blowing into his tea to cool it. "Why . . . are you thinking of getting buried ?"

"Because if you are," Shirley joined in, "you'd better try your own parish. We have only three graves left."

Christina threw in a remark of her own. "Rolf, it isn't a case of first come, first served, in Melliton churchyard. There are fifty-one people with a claim to those three graves, counting the twins born a month ago. There's been a big rise in the local population."

"You are shocking girls !" said the farmer's wife.

Her husband lit an old short briar pipe with its bowl half burned away. It stuck in his smiling mouth between a parting in his sandy moustache. He occasionally stroked his somewhat lighter-coloured beard.

Betty forced her father to tell Rolf the story of Rosie, the cow she had milked.

It appeared that there was something irregular in the matter of Rosie's birth.

The farm bull was not her sire.

Three years ago the bull from a neighbouring farm had come through the fence. The two bulls were having a good tussle.

"My fellow," Farmer Boone proceeded with his tale, "was very cross. He was giving a first-class account of himself. I was . . ." he puffed at his pipe . . . "hoping to separate them before my bull got really going. He was the tougher of the two, I could see that. At first they were just shoving their heads together. 'If only the dog will come along now,'

I thought, and I was whistling fit to blow out a rick fire. But the dog was several meadows away, with Tom and a few sheep. I couldn't be sure he would hear me, though the wind, for a blessing, was in that direction.

"By that time I'd whistled my lips dry, I was so bothered. Those two had stopped heading each other ; they were drawing off a yard or so. I could see it was going to be a bad business ; and if my bull got the other properly, as was likely, being more lively as well as stronger, the other farmer wasn't going to like the condition of his beast."

"But of course, father," Betty prompted, "we hadn't *invited* Farmer Low's bull into our meadow."

"No ; that bull wasn't our bull's guest," her father took up the helpful point, dryly. "And our chap was giving him such a look, not saying anything much, but watching him like he might tell him : 'Yea ! You can bellow your head off, if you've a mind to !' . . . No wonder the dog couldn't hear me."

"But he did, father," said Betty.

"Yes . . ." The tall man got up to knock out a little ash through the window. "Yes ; the dog was coming like the wind. Tom told me later on he'd never seen him move like it. Tom hadn't heard me call until the dog left him."

"Were you shouting ?"

"No," Mr. Boone said. "Whistling and trying to head my beast off with a fork. It was a foolish thing to do. It might have cost my animal his life. But I knew I was safe while those two had each other to go for. And Mr. Low, who is an old friend of mine, would have done as much if he'd found himself in the same fix."

"What ! Headed you off with a hayfork, father ?"

"Low's bull," the farmer said, pulling a long face at the memory of the event, "horned mine in the shoulder, and put

him out of work for the rest of the year . . . so I said to Farmer Low, when we'd got his beast back in its own meadow, and mine was standing off, a bit quiet, in a corner of the field with the dog sitting under his tail. . . 'Low,' I said, 'you see what your fellow's done. The least you can do is to let me have the occasional loan of him, until mine is fit again.'"

Christina looked across at Rolf with a smile of puritan candour.

"Rosie," she said, "is one of that bull's daughters."

"And now you know," the triumphant Betty added, "why I called it a ——"

"Darling," interposed Rolf, amid general laughter.

Idly, the big fair girl dipped a small red radish—the last of the salad—into some salt spilled on the white table-cloth, smiling to herself. She had caught the look of warmth her cousin had bestowed on the boy across the table. But she refused to say what had amused her. Christina coloured slightly.

THE farmer was the first to leave the kitchen. He went out leaving the house door ajar. This brought in a current of air through the open window, and in the general movement away from the table Rolf suddenly sneezed.

Everyone laughed but Mrs. Boone.

"There, my dear!" In concern the little woman trotted out into the porch and came back with something that Rolf, as she said, could throw over his jersey. "I knew you were sitting in a draught. Shirley, I *said* shut the window!"

"We weren't, mother, really. Father left the outer door open. *Mother!* He can't put *that* on!" The garment was one of her father's old jackets, a useful throw-on for work, but much too long for Rolf, and rather torn.

"Yes, he can. Shirley, let him!" Betty cried. "It will suit

him perfectly. He will look like one of those awful men in my old *Oliver Twist*."

Rolf in the farmer's coat came under Christina's jocularly approving regard.

"The very thing! It wants just a tuck here and there." And, as she bid him, Rolf with much help turned up the sleeves. "There, now. Quite a smart pair of cuffs," declared Christina, while Betty inquired with assumed loftiness:

"Does he get hay fever?"

Stout denials from Rolf that he ever got hay fever. Then, doubtful of the nature of hay fever, he raised his voice above the din of laughter, fresh talk, and the rattle of teacups, saucers and spoons which Shirley was sliding into the washing-up bowl in the scullery.

"What is hay fever?"

"Something," the jubilant dark sister's voice rang out, "you get if you spend too much time courting among the hay."

In raised voices the talk went on.

"Rolf doesn't go courting. Do you, Rolf?"

"No, Christy," he cried into the scullery.

Betty, folding the table-cloth, still in the kitchen, raised her brows but did not look at him.

"What! You mean to say he never has?"

"No, Betty; I didn't say that," her cousin returned the non-committal answer. "Better ask him yourself."

The girl with the folded cloth put it away in the drawer at the end of the long table, which she slammed with conviction. "He would do if he lived in Melliton."

Rolf began to wonder what the rest of the girls in Little Melliton were like. The talk had now drifted wholly into the scullery. He was left alone, a little preoccupied inside his big coat. He wandered out into the orchard. In the middle there, towering above the other trees, was a great cherry



tree, and beneath it an old rocking-chair a little smaller than the one in the kitchen. He sat down in the rocking-chair and began to rock himself peacefully. The girls could see this spectacle through the open scullery window, and laughed and called out to him their feminine insults.

The cherries were high up in the tree in rich ripe clusters. Thousands of red cherries, more even than the wild strawberries he and Christina had seen on the heath. The talk went away from the scullery window. He got up and went over to one of the other trees to pick a green unripe plum, and bit into it.

By some obscure track his thoughts went back to Anna.

Yet Anna was no unripe plum.

Anna's image had recurred to him with a renewal of his old sense of delight in her presence.

But that romance was for ever gone. . . .

\* \* \* \*

THE farmer's wife came out into the orchard. She was carrying an empty basket, and she soon had Rolf busy in the cherry-tree. This talk enabled him to get rid of his big coat without seeming, as he judged, ungrateful for its loan. Mrs. Boone made him bring a ladder and directed how he should poke it in among the branches without damaging them. She walked round the tree, following his movements, and hoped he would not fall.

Confidently he told her she need not fear. Even if the ladder were to slip, he said, he could hang on to a suitable branch.

She said she was always afraid to set the girls to this task.

Rolf said he didn't wonder. And he added the doubt whether any of the branches would be strong enough to hold

either of the girls. Certainly not Betty! "She would look wonderful hanging on to an arm of this old tree!" he called out from on high.

Mrs. Boone did not answer; though she may have pictured the scene for herself. And no doubt Betty, had she been present, would have thought this dialogue between their guest and her mother wonderful enough.

"Choose where they are ripest and best, Rolf."

"Yes . . . here's a good branch, Mrs. Boone."

He was always finding new and better branches. He sampled several of the ripest cherries and praised them above wild strawberries.

He called down:

"They are richer, juicier, sweeter by far and just as warm as the wild strawberries."

She called up:

"Fruit is always best just off the tree. The same with things out of the ground, I always think. And vegetables, it is my belief, lose half their value by the time they get to London. Or even Plymouth. I once saw a town fruit shop. The apples had been given some cruel knocks. Nearly every one. I am always sorry for the people who are forced to spend their days in big cities. The vicar says it was never God's plan."

Leaning forward over a branch, Rolf let a cherry-stone fall from his mouth, making sure, first, that Mrs. Boone was not immediately below.

"I agree with him," he announced vigorously.

Pleased, the farmer's wife chose to carry the vicar's opinions a little farther. If the Almighty had meant us to live in towns, she declared, our first parents would have been placed in a town instead of in the country.

Rolf sang out with cheerful reason :

"Adam and Eve, you mean ?"

Yes ; Mrs. Boone did mean that.

THE cherries overflowed the basket and Rolf came down the ladder. The three girls, meanwhile, were absent from the farm. They were away across the fields at the back of the house, taking the honeysuckle to the old woman for whom Christina had gathered it ; a widow of ninety, who had been forced by a little rheumatism to keep to her cottage for several days.

Mrs. Boone carried the cherries into the house.

She left some for Rolf to eat while waiting for the girls, whom he might expect back any minute. A few nice cherries would not hurt him, she said, even after so good a tea !

Rolf wandered out of the orchard gate.

The narrow road spanned a stream, deep, clear, and slow-moving in its stony bed. On each side of this bridge there was an old stone wall, rather low. He leaned over the wall, searching the depths of the stream for fish. A trout, about a foot long, fat and dark, was keeping its immobile station in mid-stream against the flow from under the bridge.

Two small boys came along the road. Rolf turned at the sound of their voices and they at once ceased their talk, looking steadily before them ; and as soon as they had gone by their glances met in a significant, amused and unspoken exchange. They wore short rough trousers and loose mended jackets ; their thick shoes gave an easy-going drag, or swing, to their footsteps ; and their peaked caps were stuck on anyhow. They were at the years when a beautiful joke can be speechless.

Rolf would have liked to share this joke.

But he *was* it.

THE wall of the bridge was warm. Everything one touched out of doors felt warm today. Albeit the sun was dropping and its rays no longer burned. And strangely, there had been no more rumbling of thunder. Beyond the squat, grey tower of the church the sky was red, a deep red splashed with yellow inseparable from the sun itself, which, no longer a brazen disc, had become something indefinable, losing itself in the heavens it transformed.

Rolf lay on his elbow at full length on the wall, face to the running water. The wall was thick enough to allow this. Other footsteps, the firm and comfortable gait of a single person approaching the bridge, fell on his ear ; and he sat up. This time it was a countryman, tired and in a dry sweat at the end of the day. A flat piece of hair that might have been glued to his scalp came to an end in a tiny curl on the edge of his forehead.

"Evenin'," he said.

And to affirm the cordiality of his salute he swung up his hand in a half-circle, almost touching the pasted curl. This he followed up by a second glance, sharper than the first ; and he passed on. His face had darkened as he perceived that the young stranger in the jersey on his bridge wall was suppressing a smile.

Rolf felt he ought to run after him, to catch up with this countryman and say :

"I wasn't laughing at you. It wasn't you at all, really, that made me laugh. Indeed, I had only just finished laughing at something else. Some boys who went by a few minutes

since made me think of something funny . . . a cricket club of young lads I used to belong to, ages ago . . .”

Too late; the countryman was soon up along by the church. At the curve of the churchyard wall he vanished, going home to his supper at his even swinging gait, and Rolf was left with his natural reflection :

“He must have thought I was laughing at his curl.”

So were the patch-work recollections of his old cricket club effaced. . .

TWENTY-SIX boys had originally formed the club. The funds to buy two bats, the wickets, one good leather ball for possible matches and a second inferior ball for practice nights, were subscribed at the rate of one half-penny a week for a vast number of weeks. Luckily no outlay was needed for the pitch ; this was free. It was in the middle of a disused brickcroft and was so level and firm that it did not really require rolling. But once in a while, as a gesture, a large roller would be borrowed from a local garden by consent of the father of the boy who was elected captain.

It was a wonderful roller. Of hollow metal, it had been filled with stones to weight it, and in the days of its prime had probably been pulled by a horse. But at that time when they borrowed it, only one shaft was left, and this was broken and rusted. Old bits of metal, caked and decayed, used to fall off as the roller was trundled across the pitch, and these had either to be trodden in or swept away. However, to make things easier, the vice-captain was able to produce a broom. And then the treasurer bought a bottle of oil (leaving the club still three-halfpence in hand).

Such keenness had never existed in a club before.

Most of the first team were boys from the mill, and wore clogs. To increase their speed between the wickets some of

them would take off their clogs and even their socks, and go in to bat barefoot. One night, in a practice game, the secretary was hit on the bare ankle, and he had collapsed on the field in a howl of rage and pain. The only words that could be made out as he nursed the bruise, gesturing and spluttering in the midst of his compassionate mates, were :

"I told you he was bowling at my foot ! Didn't I say so all the time ?"

It was true ; he *had* said so.

Unhappily, this incident brewed up into a fight in the middle of the pitch between two members of the committee—one of them an advocate of barefoot batting, the other a believer that a man should play fully shod.

Things went from bad to worse.

The story was spread about that three or four of the tougher lads, who came from a good way off, were scuttlers. Scuttlers ! Members of a gang. No worse type of human being, man or boy, was imaginable. Scuttlers wore belts with buckles that would undo in a trice. A scuttler was sensationally known to fight with fist, buckle and clog. He would whip off his belt or clog, according to need ; perhaps both. And while whirling his belt he would either hurl the clog or use it as a mailed fist.

What was to be done ?

It was secretly decided (by seventeen members) that the club was to be dissolved. On a given signal, when the seventeen were nearest to the stumps, in possession of the bats and the ball, someone was to raise the arbitrary cry :

*"Dr-a-w sticks ! Captain's orders !"*

And in a flash all the equipment was to be seized and become the property of its captors . . . the club to be reformed, later, without the scuttlers.

Rolf could well remember the scene.

Time after time the ruse ended in a fiasco. Always the scuttlers managed to hold on to a bat or a wicket or two; and the wickets, by the captain's orders, were at once repitched. Rolf's own souvenir of the final dissolution was one of the bails. He had it still. It was slightly chipped.

But what, indeed, had tickled Rolf's fancy as he lay on the bridge wall, was the memory of the noise the roller used to make when the committee rolled the pitch. . .

THE stream below the bridge made hardly any noise. Its sounds were no more than a lap and a ripple some yards lower down, where the boulders stood out and it disappeared under arches of hanging willows, trailing their branches along with it. Rooks were cawing in the tops of the tall trees beside the church. There was the softer rival note of wood-pigeons, too, though they were nowhere to be seen. The rooks had an elegant way of alighting and always chose the topmost branches. They never rose directly to a branch or entered a tree at the side like most other birds, but rose on high and sailed down to the chosen perch from above, touching it with a sort of dancing movement, caused by the final flap of their wings. This touch must have been light as a feather.

ROLF's thoughts continued to take shape from what his eye fell on. They entered channels or followed a course suggested by the veriest trifles. No idea swayed him, no impression or feeling obsessed him. In this rare mood he was filled to the brim with interest by small things . . . a splash at the edge of the brook made by some tiny animal entering the water, the flutter or the chatter of a startled fugitive bird in the marsh beyond the willows, the crowing of a cock on the farm gate-post. Cocks, it had hitherto been his belief,

began to crow at sunrise, and were usually silent after dark. But not so the cocks of Barns. They were males of restless splendour. Moonlight brought them forth again in lusty vigour, and they crowed when the moon went down. In midnight thunderstorms they crowed—greeting, perhaps, a lightning dawn.

Doubtless it was the same with the cocks of Little Melliton.

Down on the bank of the stream his eyes detected a small animal, dead in the long grass. He slid off the bridge and went down to examine it. It was grey-blue, its skin smoother and softer than velvet. No rat, for a certainty; it was so much better-looking, though its tail was something similar. Nor a mouse; it was too large. Yet more like an imaginably wild woodland mouse than a rat, if ever mice grew so big. But its feet, its strange feet! They were white, like small flattened hands, with stiff webbed fingers and pointed tips. And it had no eyes, nor even the rudiments of eyes. The place where its eyes should be was a smooth concave shape.

He brought it back on to the bridge, placed it on the wall and sat down beside it, again and again examined its eyeless face, and those hands—to learn from Christina, when presently the girls came down the road, that it was a mole.

“A mole, Christina?”

The three girls, back from their visit to the old woman, crowded round the dead creature on the wall, regarding it with dispassionate interest. At Rolf’s exclamation of innocent surprise Shirley turned away—to hide her smiles. She bit her tongue to check an impulse to ask:

“What did you think it was, an elephant?”



## XVII

**A** *mole, Christina !*" Shirley wriggled in her narrow bed, turning over for the fourth time. She had repeated Rolf's exclamation, with suppressed bursts of hilarity, about the same number of times. She appeared to be finding it a hard task to subdue her amusement at the memory of this scene at the bridge earlier in the evening.

Her sister laughed from the other bed, contributing, in this large old bedroom lit up by the moon's pale beams, to the mimicry of Rolf that had lasted since they had come upstairs.

*"I'd no idea it was a mole !"*

They laughed, keeping their voices low.

"You'll get comfortable in a minute, Shirley. Can't you keep still ?"

"No ; there's a lump of bedding under my hip. I'm trying to flatten it out. Besides, you needn't talk. I've heard you roll about, before now, like an old sow with the stomach-ache. No wonder the springs of your bed are strained."

"Tonight ? You never have ! I've been lying here like a log."

"I didn't say tonight. I mean other nights." The girl moved her dark head on the pillow to avoid a ray of moonlight in her eyes. "I wonder what Rolf would say if he saw the one on my back." She raised her arm leisurely and let her fingers travel over her bare shoulder as far down as they could. "I can just reach it. That shows I'm not getting stiff with old age."

There was a laugh before the answer came from Betty, who

was the younger sister by two years. "It's a good job your joints don't creak like the springs of your bed," she said. "But I didn't think it was your own mole you were thinking of—when you turned your back on him so that you could laugh."

"When did I laugh?"

"When he said——"

"Oh yes, I remember," and Shirley mimicked with another laugh: "A mole, Christina!"

"Christy herself has a mole," said Betty. "Haven't you seen it when you've gone swimming with her?"

"No; you know she always undresses behind a rock, generally the biggest on the shore."

"Have a good look next time. You can easily go round her rock to admire something or other. I should say, admire her feet——"

"Why 'feet'?"

"Well, she'll look down at them in surprise, and that'll give you your opportunity."

Her sister laughed again. "That's no good. Besides, her bathing towel's as big as a tent and she has her costume on in a jiffy. If I had her figure I wouldn't be so frightened to show it."

"You aren't."

Shirley uttered a startled protest, wriggling to dodge the moonlight again, pushed her feet out of bed, slowly sliding after them. She said she couldn't stand the moon any longer, and went across to the open casement. She raised her arms to pull down the blind.

"You aren't going to shut out all the fresh air, surely! You should just see yourself. You are entirely outlined by the moonlight shining through your nightgown."

"What if I am? The man in the moon is too far off for me to mind."

Shirley left a small space for the air to come in. She turned, made a sweeping gesture with both her hands, smoothing her nightgown down to her hips with an air of challenge.

But Betty's interest in the subject had lapsed. And she said: "We aren't going to talk about your figure."

"Who started it? I didn't." Shirley got back into bed as if making a dive. "You were telling me about Christina's mole, until your attention was taken by the beauty of my figure."

"How can you be so vain!"

"Easily. Where *is* that mole?"

For a brief spell Betty affected to ignore her. She had been struck by her sister's shape and poise in the moonlight, and may have been allowing her thoughts to adjust themselves. But she sounded as if she were laughing to herself under the sheet.

"Well, it's where she sits down," she told Shirley, at last.

The sisters continued to be quietly amused.

Then the elder made the sober comment:

"If Rolf saw that, he *would* be mole-struck!"

"He would," Betty agreed as if she also had been struck by the idea. "It's a gem."

There was silence again.

"Her skin being so white, too," at length came the meditative rejoinder.

BUT this meditation did not last long. Though they had been up since early morning, working most of the day, and since had passed the evening in the liveliest spirits their minds

were kept fresh, sleep thrust off, by a jocular exchange of opinions concerned with their inmost curiosity. In this old farmhouse of their birth they could hear the sound of the running stream every night of their lives. Had either girl ever thought of examining its constant murmur, its ripple, even its pretentious roar when it was full, she would have found that it lay on the border of her senses, and need not be summoned nearer except at will. If she wished, she could listen, as when she chose she could look on its physical shape, its bending course at the margin of the orchard and the lawn. In the lengthened absence of farm noises after nightfall the brook gave limpid tone to the silence. And as if still further to endow it the mild light of the moon made it luminous. . .

"WHAT are you thinking of?"

"Nothing."

"Don't be a humbug! You never lie on your back with your eyes open unless you are thinking."

"Is that how you do your thinking?"

"Some of it."

"Then you ought to lie on your back oftener."

"Don't be ridiculous, Shirley."

They wrangled in soft voices. But Betty could only obtain from her sister in the other bed the admission that she was thinking of the oak beams in the ceiling. And that anything of this sort had a place in her sister's mind, a place firm enough to interest her silently, at this time of night, she declined to believe.

"Oaks!"

Shirley laughed at the contempt in her voice. "Well, you know what father told Rolf about them. How the wood will last forever if you keep it in a dry place and don't let

the Death Watch beetle get at it. And that you should never transplant an oak, but let it grow in the virgin soil where the acorn falls ——”

“Virgin my grandmother! If you are going to bring all that dull stuff up again ——”

“You’ll turn over and go to sleep, I suppose? Besides, Grannie wasn’t a virgin. If she had been you wouldn’t be there in that bed, now.”

“Oh, Shirley! You do show respect for the old, don’t you?”

“As much as they deserve. Good night.”

But Betty was not to be put off. In a low voice she called her sister’s name: “Shirley . . .”

“I’ve said good night.”

“Shirley—you remember when you were much stronger than I was?”

No answer.

“And what you used to do when you meant to force me to speak?”

“There were several things my little cat of a sister used to deserve.”

“One of them was squeezing the cold sponge down my back. I used to ask God in my prayers how I could get even with you.”

“Oh! Sneak! I always suspected you were telling somebody. I thought it was Tom.”

“I told Tom, too. And I got exactly the same advice. I was to eat more porridge ——”

“Glutton!”

“—and bide my time, Shirley. Well, I’ve bided my time. My time has come. I can hold you down with one hand. There’s a great new sponge over on the washstand. I thought of it this week when mother bought it. Then I de-

cided to wait until some winter's night when you were specially snug in bed and the water was freezing cold. But I dare say tonight will do as well. Even if it's lukewarm, it's wet."

Defeated, Shirley pretended to hold out. She said the jug on the washstand was empty.

"It isn't! I'll prove it if you like."

In face of this renewed menace the elder girl wavered finally. "You needn't," she said. "I was ready to tell you all along if you hadn't started bullying me . . . I was thinking of the rosemary bush in Christina's garden."

"What about it?"

"Only what I've always thought."

"Tell me."

"That she's crazy to keep it where it is, by that gate. Staring her in the face every time she passes it. Who on earth wants a keepsake that is for ever growing bigger and bigger?"

They were leaning on their elbows, the better to see each other.

"I don't call it a keepsake," Betty said. "For a thing to be a keepsake it should be a gift from the man himself, or else sent by him. I don't believe for a minute that Ned even knows she's got it. I never did. You know how dead against talking those monks are, Shirley. It's almost like school! Special marks for the one who can hold his tongue longest. Besides, who was to tell him?"

Shirley answered: "Old baldhead might if he knew."

"That fat monk who used to be on the gate?"

"Oh, Betty. He wasn't so very fat. You remember the fat prior there before this one. And there are several fatter monks."

"He's fat enough. Too fat for me!"

"Perhaps," said the elder sister idly, "he'd consider you too fat for him."

"Pig!"

Shirley allowed her head to sink down on to the pillows, and lay with her cheek on her bare arm, keeping her lower ear free so that she could still listen with both. She said it always made her arm dead if she leaned upon it too long. "Oh Lord, I've got awful pins and needles in it, now!"

"Don't blaspheme," said Betty. "Rub it."

"Not likely! It makes it worse."

Their talk went back to the rosemary, to the day three years ago when Christina had begged the sprig from Brother John. "The very week," pursued Shirley, whose arm was now better and was being waved in the air, so that she could lean up on it again in comfort, "after Ned had entered the monastery. And you know what rosemary means. It's the special flower of remembrance."

"It's hardly a flower," was the reply. Betty demurred as if thus, somehow, to protect Christina from its full implication. "It is more a shrub."

"Goose! As if that matters. Besides, it has a pretty blue flower."

"So it has," admitted Betty, who was a little tired. "I'd forgotten." Her cheek slipped off her hand and she recovered her position steadily, to delay the approach and soften the severity of the pins and needles in her own arm. But she was too late. She rolled on to her back, her fair, plump arm outstretched on the pillow, bearing the onset of its almost intolerable tingle in silence so that the last laugh should not be with Shirley, whose voice came to her:

"You know what people said—that Christy wouldn't have him before he went, and when he'd gone she wanted him."

"Oh my! I wish you had my arm. It's awful!"

Shirley laughed triumphantly.

"Serves you right. You shouldn't have laughed at me." She mimicked her sister's exclamations. "Oh my! Oh my! Tell me when it's better and I'll go on."

"You do enjoy seeing agony when it's in somebody else, don't you?"

"Agony! What words you use! Besides," Shirley protested, "I can't see you in this light. Not properly. I can only hear you. Be careful, or you'll go through that bed. It's only a child's cot. It was never meant for a baby elephant. I was about to remind you it was the week after Ned Penn vanished, to the exact day, that Christy asked the old boy on the monastery gate for the rosemary. Somebody saw her coming home with it on her bicycle. That person mentioned it in Barns post-office, and Louie Brett, the post-mistress told everybody. I heard the gossip myself; so did you. They said Christina wanted to change her mind when it was too late."

"Change her mind! She'd never made it up."

"I didn't say she had. I said people were saying she'd changed it."

"But not those who knew the truth. As I remember it," said Betty, "Uncle Alfred Nolan was bothered because Christy walked back with Ned Penn all the way to Alderlow late one night after the Barns harvest dance. She happened to be staying in Alderlow all that week. They walked four miles instead of accepting a lift in Farmer Denby's trap, which was going that way. Mr. Denby was taking home some of the others from the dance. It had been fixed up that she was to have a lift in one of the traps or carts taking people home. Uncle Alfred said she should have welcomed the offer, however full the trap was. He didn't think it was Christy's business to say that the pony already had a big enough load."



That was for Farmer Denby to say. If Farmer Denby said there was room, there *was* room. Uncle pretended he didn't really mind her walking, but it was what people would say. And on top of that, Edward Penn, who'd been dancing with Christy more than his share, had fallen terribly in love with her and tried to get her to promise to marry him as soon as she was old enough, as soon as her father would agree——"

Betty, a little excited by this memory, sat up in bed, paused to take breath. She completed this tale, which was common knowledge to them both :

"Christina wasn't fond enough of Ned to say yes and agree to keep the troth a secret. She tried to laugh it off. That sent Ned wild, and she let him kiss her ——"

Shirley laughed in the dark. "It wasn't the first time!"

Her sister added : "Christy would never have said a word about the whole thing. Aunt Alfred Nolan said so, when it all came out."

"Why do you always call her Aunt Alfred ? She is Aunt Sarah."

"Aunt Sarah, then. Christy told her mother, Aunt Sarah. She had to. Because Ned himself went straight to Uncle the day after, and blurted everything out. You know how Uncle took it. He said Ned had paid Christy a great compliment. He said that any man who proposed to a girl was paying her the greatest compliment in his power. He patted him on the back and thanked him. He said that Christina was still only a child. He asked Ned to give her a chance to look round a bit longer and not be so deadly serious about things . . . and perhaps all would come out right."

"I know Uncle did his best to soothe him," said Shirley. "And he wouldn't be soothed. I think he knew he was being put off. But what puzzles me is how Rolf came to walk straight into him at the monastery."

"You mean 'cycle' straight into him."

"Same thing."

Betty asked impatiently : "What makes us all so blessed sure it *was* Ned ? It could have been some other young monk. How do we absolutely know ? He never spoke of Christy. He didn't tell Rolf his name. And Rolf didn't tell him he was staying with Uncle Peter Nolan. What on earth those two found to talk about is a mystery ! They seem to have said nothing at all to each other, by all accounts."

"Rolf described him perfectly," was the answer. "His voice, his height, and how he was waiting all day for somebody who hadn't turned up. Christina got it all out of him when they were smelling at her clump of rosemary. Inside the monastery gate he'd fallen over some in the dark—so mother said. Aunt Sarah told her so. Rolf told them he would remember the scent on his hands as long as he lived. He'd clutched at it in the dark. Christina marched him straight to her pet bush and told him to smell at it. He rubbed some on his hands. And he promptly said : 'Yes, that was it ! That was it !' "

"Shirley, what makes you say Christy 'got it all out of him ?' There was no reason for Rolf not to tell."

Shirley replied : "At first he told only half of it. As far as I can make out, he thought it would upset her."

"Why ? He didn't even know she had ever met his monk."

"He did," replied Shirley. "He did. Uncle Peter had already told him they were tremendous good friends. Rolf said so."

"Who did he say so to ?"

"Christina herself, of course."

FOR some minutes the moon had been overclouded. The bedroom was in pitch darkness. A cock which may have been

enjoying the moonlight in the farmyard had crowed loudly. They heard the flutter of the hens in the cote as it returned to its perch.

Betty made an exclamation.

"Oh my ! It must be nearly twelve o'clock. It's ages since I heard it strike eleven and we've to be up soon after five. What fools we are !"

"Wait a minute."

"Why ?"

"I haven't told you what I meant to say at the start. I'd almost forgotten. Christina really does think Ned was waiting for her that day."

"At the monastery ! Impossible. Why . . . he's a monk ! He's supposed to have put all thoughts of women aside for good."

Shirley answered :

"You aren't soft enough to suppose they do ! Anyway, when you stayed behind with old Mrs. Drury, arranging her honeysuckle, Christy said to me : 'Oh dear ! Oh dear, Shirley ! Don't you think I ought to have gone, and tried to see him ?' She seems to think she could have comforted him."

The only answer was a brief and scornful splutter of sleepy laughter.

## XVIII

**R**OLF, himself, had seen how this matter was bothering Christina ; and he had asked her.

What sort of comfort could she have offered to the young monk if she had met him, there by the monastery gate ? With what sort of words soothed him ?

This last reached her heart.

The idea turned itself round and round in her head. Under her breath she repeated his phrase :

"With what sort of words . . . ?"

Rolf had asked her what she was cudgelling her brains about. So familiar was he with spectres in his own mental cupboard, he was ready to demolish all hers. But he might have known better. For within the range of his own experience it must have been plain that spectres are rarely, by the power of reason, demolished ; they are merely given a new face—which soon looks like the old one.

Christina, with desperate humour, suggested :

"I might at least have dusted his cell . . . if they had let me in."

As this evoked no reply she believed her slender joke had gone astray. She was left biting her lip, out of touch with him, while Rolf, in fact, was pursuing her fantastic idea with an ironically frolicsome curiosity. No, he thought ; better to leave the dust. Better to write a message in it with her finger. Perhaps during the monk's absence at chapel ! Best of all, choose a window-pane. The one thickest with dust.

"And sign it with a big C," jestingly he finished aloud, as if the girl were aware of his previous thoughts.

"Sign what with a big C?"

He had to fill in the gap, which put the matter on an amusing plane, where they kept it for quite a while, diverting themselves with all sorts of possibilities. Rolf said the idea of a monk's old sweetheart paying a secret visit to his cell was wonderful! "*Young* sweetheart, I should say," he corrected himself.

This brought a denial.

Christina declared she had never stood in that relation to the monk. Not strictly. And having denied it, she turned pale. Her distress was visible and dissolved into startling words.

"I'm like Peter."

"Peter who?"

"Who denied Christ."

Rolf burst out laughing and rallied her sharply. "There you go again!"

She heaved a sigh of relief, as if his rebuke had cleared the air. She said it was so good of him to help her.

He dismissed her gratitude with a grand air. He said the whole affair was wonderful. He had been afraid when first he came to Barns there would be little to do and still less to think about. The prospect had been alarming.

"Now there is all this!" he concluded. And he regarded his companion with whimsical sympathy.

"Oh, I'm so glad, Rolf," said Christina, with the ghost of a tragic smile, "I've been able to—to provide——"

"Why, it's true, Christy. But I do wish it was any other girl but you, involved in it."

This earnest wish engrossed him for a full minute, while she on her side wondered why, specially, he should wish it were another girl. And how, if it had been so, he could have taken the same interest in the matter, the same intimate interest, such as to occupy his mind so thoroughly.

"What sort of a man was he? What was Penn like, Christy?"

She replied that, surely, he already knew. He had met him.

"Yes, but only on a pitch-black night. I mean in disposition. Habitually. Was he solemn?"

Christina checked an impulse to laugh. She could easily have said: "Not more solemn than you. Nor yet, for that matter, so solemn." But she said: "By comparison with some people I know—at any rate, with one person——"

He took her up swiftly. "That's all very well," he said and paused. "You'll see, some day!"

What she would see he left her guessing at. And he shrugged his shoulders, jerked his head as if to rid himself of some shadow. Christina was speaking and he came back to her voice.

"Yes," she said, "Ned Penn could be gay."

"Used you to walk out with him?"

"From one place to another, yes. But only from place to place. And not very often. Sometimes we would all come home together from the house of some friend, or from a dance in the village hall." She added the detached item of pleasant news: "Now and again they have those dances in winter you know, Rolf. You would like them. But you don't dance, you say; I'd forgotten. Besides"—with fresh remembrance—"you'll be gone before winter. That's hard to believe." She laughed. "We've all got so used to you."

He asked whether she and the monk used to get separated from the rest of the party, on their walks home from the village hall.

"Once or twice. But he wasn't a monk then, Rolf, you know."

"Twice . . . or only once?"

She said three times in all. The last time of all was their

walk from Barns to Alderlow. "When the trap was so full, Rolf. You should have seen that little pony pulling its load of all those people. Several of the girls as fat as butter! Dairymaids who live just outside Alderlow. I hadn't the heart to add to that pony's load, never mind the springs of the trap. 'Twas the night father got so cross—or he did the next day, I mean." She laughed deprecatingly at the memory of her father's display of temper. "But you've heard all about that."

Rolf hadn't; he had heard next to nothing about it. A wry hint now and then, let fall by Christina herself.

"Did you ever kiss him?"

"No."

"But he kissed you."

"Once or twice."

"Twice . . . or only once?" he pinned her down.

"Three times in all." Honesty should triumph.

"On the three separate walks you took with him?"

"Yes."

"Once during each walk, or a few kisses on each night? You see, Christy"—with large assurance—"I'm testing the whole affair, just to convince you how light, how relatively negligible is your responsibility . . ."

CHRISTINA could feel easier when these admissions were over and done with. No longer were the facts shut up in her own heart. Rolf knew them and had judged her, assuring her she was not less innocent than other girls. Which girls, if any in particular, he did not say, though he had defined his view of innocence. An innocent girl was a girl who had wittingly done no man a wrong. A remarkable point of view. Like some others of his which she dared never question: though, for herself, she felt that this particular definition gave a girl

too wide a scope, too much latitude. But she would as soon have debated the topic of female innocence with Miss Brett, the postmistress, as argue it out with him. Best of all did she admire Rolf's phrase :

*Relatively negligible.*

How helpfully he had rounded it all off ! But had she not, in these confessions she had been making, imputed too much blame to Ned ? To Ned, who had loved her beyond belief. . .

CHRISTINA rarely day-dreamed in the presence of another person ; her mind was too lively, her candour too sociable. Out of this momentary pensiveness she was startled by Rolf expressing a wish to get into the monastery. At his words there rushed through her mind a picture of him and Penn as neighbouring monks, in cells side by side. But she was carrying her inference too far. Rolf's purpose was not to join Friar Hugh there ; it was to pay him a visit.

He proceeded to explain his proposal.

In the event of failure to see the monk he might at least gain some direct news of him. Christina thought the idea splendid. Ways and means were discussed. Rolf, it was agreed, was to contrive, at his leisure or while at work up in the allotment, some suitable approach to the prior. Through the prior alone, he said, they might take it for granted, could authority be gained to go inside.

"Why not," he suggested, "visit the place as a possible monk ?"

"Rolf, never !" He must not give them the slightest hold. They would jump at him as soon as look. He might not come back. And the girl's mind flew back to childhood, when the gipsies used to come round with their caravans, tall and overladen with cheap household goods to sell—but more



often on the look-out, as everyone knew, for stray children. The gipsies' own children were generally dusky, chubby, laughing. Even the smallest gipsy boys smoked in secret, and the girls ran wild until the time of betrothal. But the fat gipsy children, it was always said, were merely flaunted as an enticement. If you were stolen by the gipsies you were soon sold, secretly—in other parts of the country where there was a shortage of children. Perhaps across the sea!

Rolf broke in again, this time suggesting that he might succeed if he merely asked to be allowed to look round.

"Do haycarts ever go there?"

Carts, he meant, taking in hay for the prior's horse. Why not go along on a load of hay? This plan to be used only, of course, as a last resort.

She shook her head. No; the monks did their own hay-making. Besides, they didn't need so much hay for only one horse. She managed not to smile at the idea: Rolf on top of an immense load of hay drawn by two big shire horses, entering the monastery gate to take a look round!

"I suppose, Christy, they would never have a stallion in the monastery?"

By this time she had grown familiar with his byways of thought and speech. And at most times she could indeed reply at once; if need be, turning the point lightly as a good fencer.

"Why," she said, laughing, "you aren't proposing to ride into the monastery mounted on a stallion?"

Rolf's face lit up. He hadn't been thinking of any such thing.

"Oh, Christy! It never entered my head. What a triumph that would be!"

She joined in his laughter, amused that he should think it so much more impressive to ride into the monastery on a

stallion than on a gelding. In reality Rolf had been musing merely on the somewhat forlorn career of the prior's horse. And he told her so, hilariously adding the spontaneous description :

"An equine eunuch in a mareless stable, Christy !"

Even this, spoken with his snort of laughter, the tail end of his thoughts of compassion or of contempt for the poor animal, the friendly girl accepted without obvious embarrassment. She was, however, content to respond to only half of his allusion.

"I wonder," she said, "what the farmers here would say if you called their geldings that !"

THERE was now to happen the trifling episode that lingered afterwards in her memory more than anything else in all their talk. They were sitting on a gate. They often sat on gates. Rolf's legs were astride the top bar, his back to the post. Christina was at the other end, seated as it were side-saddle, looking across the meadows favoured by the Denby prize bull. Above their heads towered the enormous chestnut tree Rolf had seen in bud in spring, and had mistaken for an oak. The bull was nowhere to be seen. From the nearby hedge the young thrushes, now fully fledged, had flown away.

Between the boy and the girl silence prevailed.

For five minutes, by mutual agreement, they had not spoken a single word. Christina was finding the strain considerable. She was on the edge of breaking down, but strove valiantly not to be the first to do so. They had entered into a stubborn compact. Rolf called it their temporary vow of silence. He kept looking up at her, making strange noises, smiling provocatively.

It was ridiculous.

Soon, Christina felt she was doing violence to her con-

science. But Rolf was so funny. In the intervals between her speechless laughter she had waves of shame. She had not, when giving her promise, foreseen this mortal caricature of a sacred discipline.

Rolf perceived her changing expressions.

From suppressed amusement to pained, even contorted gravity, she changed. He attributed this to her efforts not to lose the contest. She was looking away altogether.

At first when this game had started, she wanted to break out with the protest :

"But a monk, if he met a nun, would not try to make her laugh."

Then she had gone further, violating her inmost sense of purity with the secret question :

"How do I know, how do I know what a monk *might do*—if he met a nun in a country lane and they paused to sit on a gate ?"

Wondering whether God might strike her dead if she kept up this mischief much longer, she continued to keep her face averted.

At his end of the gate Rolf stirred.

The old four-barred gate shook with the weight of his movement as he raised himself on his feet and stood up. When he sat down again the girl at the other end knew without looking that he had moved nearer. The old gate shook again as he repeated this movement. This climbing, approaching movement ! Her mind flew off in bits, but her body remained still seated there.

His breath was on her face.

He had kissed her cheek and jumped down.

Under her breath she said something. He heard his name :  
"Rolf . . . !"

"Christy," he laughed in triumph, "you have broken your

vow !” But before crying out this he had time to form the opinion that Christina’s cheek was as cool as Anna’s, when he used to begin to kiss it early in the evening.

\* \* \* \*

CHRISTINA’S bed, a feather bed, was large and comfortable. It was an old-fashioned four-poster, but no curtains had been used on the tall posts for a generation. In this bed she lay falling asleep.

At the moment she lost consciousness of her surroundings but was still aware of herself, she imagined that she took her mother into her confidence with the news that she had been kissed again. Her mother asked who had kissed her and she gave the name.

Her mother deplored the incident.

“Ah ! All that over again.” She called Christina her dear child and said : “Just think of what came in the trail of the last kisses. . . Was not that lesson enough ?”

She went off into a deep dream.

In her dream she passed on the same news of this new kiss to Ned Penn, who asked : “Where ?”

“On the cheek,” she told him.

“Turn the other cheek, Christy,” he said, in his gentle voice.

She did, and he kissed it, saying that kisses did not matter. “See . . .” And he kissed her again and again.

“Are you sure, Ned ?” She was on the brink of ceasing to withhold herself, of responding with generous warmth to his ardent caresses.

“Positive, sweetheart. Besides, you are nineteen now.”

Poor Christina, awaking with a start from her dream, had a sense of profound moral guilt.

## XIX

AS a rule, the task, digging a hole in a burial ground, can have but one meaning, and that a sombre one.

But tonight it was otherwise.

This job Fred Dell had set himself in Barns churchyard was not sombre. Between-whiles he paused, leaning over his spade, wiped the sweat from his brow and laughed noiselessly—laughed to the pit of his stomach. His thoughts of the sexton, of the rage of that crooked old fox if he could but have seen him now, were enough to make a cat laugh. Dell said to himself in the pride of his cunning, the joy of his luck :

“Drunk ! Drunk as a lord !” and again a minute later :  
“Crooked old fox !”

Why, yes ; it was enough to make a cat laugh. For he had never planned to start this side of midnight, and he had always meant to choose a night without a moon. But he knew, to a pint, how much the grave-digger had drunk, had seen him to bed ; and secure in these thoughts he went on with his digging, careful not to let his spade ring against a stone. He was hoping to reach the buried treasure well before dawn. The pirate’s plunder, he called it.

Liquor had emboldened Dell. Another effect was to make him feel preternaturally alert. The lightest rustle caught his ear. He listened to the falling apart of the clods of earth as they rolled over the crest of the heap he had thrown up. Once when a great spadeful broke up after some delay, part of it rolling back into the hole, he was startled ; perhaps because his thoughts had wandered into other channels. Then

a frog made him jump. He had stepped out of the hole to rest and the frog made two prodigious leaps in the dewy grass at his feet.

"I be'ant afraid of 'e'!" he assured himself.

And soon, when he had dug another half-dozen spadefuls :  
"Who would be afraid of a frog?"

The shadow of the church was falling across the man with the spade in his oblong hole. He was keeping to the grave-line formed by the original turf-mound on its surface. To remove the mound had been the first part of his task. Except for its bareness, the absence of a tombstone, memorial urn, any bowl or vase of flowers or script of identity, it was like the graves around. Indeed, there were some other very old graves with nothing to identify them.

He tried to think out a suitable epitaph for this one, but could think of nothing better than :

'Here lies a Pirate's Secret Hoard.'

He gave a swift glance round, not sure whether he had kept perfect silence during this burst of amusement. "A good strong box"—his thoughts took shape again. "Of good ship's timber. Resting in peace. Full of pieces . . ." Exhilarated by his own joke he dug with fresh energy, falling meanwhile into a long speculation. What kind of pieces did the box contain . . . bar gold . . . plain sovereigns . . . jewels? He would shiver its timbers. He had his carpenter's chisel (its iron head wrapped with cloth), his old wooden mallet, and a small drill to give the chisel a start : all these lest the box should be too heavy to remove. And if it were of iron—he had a plan to deal with that difficulty too. He knew where the sexton kept his wheelbarrow. He meant to go for the barrow in his stocking-feet : yes, take off his boots and go over to the cottage, bring the barrow across on his back, muffle its wheel in some old sacking, oil the spindle, heave up the box

and away—leaving by the little wicket gate at the back of the churchyard.

Soon the low moon would come round the north side of the church. As yet its rays were about parallel with the line of the coast. It was moving inland as it rose higher. But Dell was in no hurry for more light. Time enough for that when the whole parish was abed. As for ghosts . . . if ghosts should walk in the churchyard after midnight he was prepared even for them. He had brought a keg of good cider ; home-brewed. At the inn where he had humbugged the sexton, pretending to get fuddled himself, he had not touched the cider. This handy little keg had remained unbroached, hanging by a ring on a hook attached to his belt, which was how it accompanied him to and fro every day. The keg was now within easy reach, visible ; it stood on end on the low stone border of an adjoining grave. Its bung was towards him.

After a while Fred Dell was sure he heard footsteps some way off. He cocked one ear, letting his mouth fall open the better to listen. He drew in his lower lip, about to bite it ; but something put him off. A midge had gone into his mouth and he did not bite his lip but spat out, expressing his wrath in a silent :

“Blast !”

This solitary expletive did double service then. It cursed the insect and marked his fresh vexation, for he had lost contact with those footsteps before properly locating them. Approaching a second ago from the cliff road, they were no longer to be heard. What kind of feet, in what sort of boots, to whom they could belong, there was no clue. As completely as the gnat, they had vanished.

The reason was simple ; their owner had paused : he had halted in uncertainty after entering the lane.

His last stride had swung him round to face the hedge, into which, it might have appeared, he intended to walk blindly. At that spot there were trees on both sides of the lane and their branches, meeting overhead, held him in their deep shadow. Nevertheless he was notably tall and solid-looking and was clad—even in this darkness a passer-by might have seen—in garments out of the ordinary. His flowing smock reached to his feet. Over this was thrown a sort of double apron, with a back as well as a front. His neck was wrapped about with a queer sort of muffler, a heavy roll done up or doubled up at the back. This was his hooded cowl.

These robes were nearly white, or at least grey.

If the moon, which was already round the corner of the church, had filtered through the trees, it would have revealed a shining patch, a bald circle in the middle of the tall man's head. And it might also have revealed the bewilderment on his nerve-lined face. The monk was wondering whether to turn round and go back. But besides, he was full of reflections that were jostled by memories of this familiar scene . . . and it was with a start of recognition and pleasure that his eyes, searching the dark hedge, caught sight of a tiny speck of light: indeed there were scores; he couldn't miss them, microscopic globes of clear, soft light. They were the lights in the tails of glow-worms—female glow-worms. Until this minute he had forgotten their existence; not once had he seen the light of a glow-worm in the monastery garden.

Then he laughed, with sharp humour.

Of course not!

Their proper place was a nunnery.

At all times of the year the sea sent its permanent murmur, or its louder wash as it broke on the shore, as far as Barns church, with which the monk at the top of the lane was now



more or less in line. But so accustomed was he to this muffled noise that he would not have sworn he was conscious of it, until a sudden burst of laughter reached his ear, a masculine laugh—in one outburst—which instantly died, leaving him only the low murmur from the coast to listen to.

"If you laugh like that," said Christina to Rolf in her cautionary voice, and stopped. This was said beyond the monk's hearing. The pair had emerged into the open at the foot of the opposite lane, returning from their trip to Little Melliton.

Nevertheless they had an unseen audience, for their words carried easily over the churchyard wall.

"Why, what's wrong with my laugh?"

"You'll waken the sexton."

"Poor old buffer!"

"His cottage is in darkness, I see," said Christina.

"Except for the moonlight." Rolf had stopped still beside her in this silent and luminous Broadway; and in a lower tone he added: "If he is sitting at his window his eyes will be rather dazzled."

Christina said the dazzle was only outside reflection on the window-pane. The sexton wouldn't get it inside. "Look, Rolf," she said, "at the apples on his old trees. You've no idea what a clever gardener he is."

Rolf had never thought of the sexton as a gardener; and he was further surprised to see such good fruit growing on those old and decrepit trees. Beyond the sexton's tumble-down orchard were more sumptuous grounds, with the rectory roof gleaming smoothly among a spangle of tall silver birches, their leaves flanked by towering chestnuts and old holly trees, darkly polished. He turned to look over the churchyard gate on his right, and Christina, at his elbow, observing his steady stare,

said : "Now don't start falling in love with our churchyard. There's no more room in it for strangers than there was at Melliton."

They leaned over the gate.

"Isn't that a new grave over there?" She was pointing with her finger in some surprise. "It has earth all round it. But I don't see any planks. They generally put planks over an empty grave."

Who could have died today? She thought of all the old people in Barns — all those who might be considered tottering — but could fix on nobody's death that would call for a hurried burial. Then Rolf wanted to climb over the gate to see how deep the sexton had got down. But she would not let him. She said it seemed to her, from here, as if it might be the old treasure grave there used to be so much talk about years ago, in the days of the last rector. "Before I was born," she concluded loudly.

"*Before she was born* ——" a hollow, wrenched voice echoed close at hand.

They stood rooted to the spot. They had already turned their backs on the churchyard and the voice reached them over their shoulders from somewhere on the right. Christina had actually begun a fresh sentence : "Everyone used to say ——" but she had got no farther, and asked in alarm :

"Rolf, whatever was that?"

The boy nerved himself to reply : "Nothing, Christy. Probably the sexton." But that voice! No, it was not the voice of the sexton. It had taken him back to the great door of the monastery and the seat by the wall. And he sang out a bold :

"Good night!"

No one answered.

But for Christina he would have called again.

"No, no, you'll waken the rector."

There was a stifled sob ; something briefer than a moan, expressing pain or despair.

"That happened before," Rolf announced.

"Oh, I heard it, Rolf. I heard a gate shake, too." Christina still kept her voice low.

"Probably a cow backing into a gate in the lane there," he told her, stifling his tremor of voice and limbs with all his might.

"But cows don't speak, Rolf. I distinctly heard——"

Rolf cried softly in the direction of the lane, whence these sounds had come : "Are you in pain ? Is someone hurt ?" Then to the trembling girl beside him : "To me it sounded like——" And Christina, who must have been entertaining the same unuttered thought, sent forth into the shadows the soft plea :

"Ned, Ned, are you there, Ned ? If you are there, let us see you."

In the silence that prevailed a new sound came faintly to the ears of the two listeners : Plop-lop-lop-lop. Very rapidly. Then Christina whispered : "I believe somebody's having a game. Do you know what that was ? It was cider ! I know the sound it makes."

Rolf's brain refused to clear. The bubbling had been as audible to him as to his companion, but he could not yet diagnose it as anything separate from this disturbing episode. It belonged to it. All his ideas were swimming round in his head ; and in a tone hardly less burdened with familiar scorn than with surprise, he challenged the girl in a loud whisper :

"Cider ! Why not beer ?"

"Drunk straight from the keg !" she shot the further whisper into his ear.

With ghastly raillery he retorted : "It was the dripping of blood ; human blood — though he well imagined that a blood-letting would not make that sound and that ghosts of the churchyard do not bleed. He pulled at the girl's arm and said loudly :

"Christy, let's go !"

They quickened their steps homeward.

Christina was the first to speak. Believing she had solved the mystery after all, she spoke with the assurance born of immense relief. "I know . . ." Her voice fell to a significant whisper : "Lovers !" It wasn't the first time courting couples had chosen a retreat up by the church and tried to frighten other people away. She said they must have been a bonny pair, the man drinking cider like that.

"I wonder whether they saw us," she continued. "Or could guess who we were ? But, of course, they must have heard us talking. They'll have a fine tale to tell."

She had recovered her spirits enough to tell Rolf all about the fabulous treasure grave. She was convinced it was the one they were looking at when the hidden person had echoed her words.

SOME few minutes ago, the monk had descended nearly to the foot of the lane. Upon hearing below him Rolf's isolated burst of laughter he had turned from the glow-worms in the hedge, crossing to the side where the grassy verge was broader. Treading down the ferns, the nettles, impeded by the thorns which caught at his long robe, he allowed himself to advance until he reached a gate on the same side as the churchyard. There were voices in front, indistinct words exchanged between two persons, clearly a man and a girl. When he heard Christina speak he was affected by an emotional shock, and he could well have been unable, in the next few seconds, to

describe his sensations or indeed what exactly happened to him. He made a startled movement. He had flung himself against the gate as if to get out of the way. This—in spite of a contrary impulse to run out of the lane with the cry on his lips :

“Oh, it is you ! It is you !”

His arm was resting on the top bar of the gate, which he grasped also with his other hand. This afforded him some support.

He heard Rolf call out good night, and with all his heart he wanted to answer him. But he realised with hardly any further dismay that it must be he who was with Christina, and he remained silent and still, except that under his breath he said : “The boy with the bicycle . . .” crossing himself for the first time since he had walked out of the monastery.

Until the sound of their footsteps had died away he did not cease to pray nor to cross himself repeatedly. His immediate desire was to go and sit down for a little while in the church porch—before returning to the monastery. He opened the gate and entered the field. The grass was long, rich and heavy with warm dew. The idea suddenly crossed his mind that this would be a grand night for mushrooms.

Mushrooms ! Gathered in the early morning.

He recollected their flavour, done in a certain way . . . eaten with a large slice of toast. He was skirting the field by a grassy track trodden down inside the hedge, leading to a gap—or an open gate—in the corner. His boots shone with wet, the bottom of his robe was soaked and it flapped against his bare legs.

The monk passed through the gap.

Here the turf was firm and springy, the grass short, the track skirting the rear wall of the churchyard ; and it was

here, before he pulled up at the small, old wicket gate in the middle of the wall, that he remembered something else about mushrooms. They were—his brain paused in its flight of thoughts to register the isolated fact—not yet in season.

## XX

SO fast had Fred Dell worked from the start that when all these interruptions began he had dug a hole big enough to hide in. He had thrown himself into his task with three times the energy of, say, any ordinary gravedigger. True, there had been moments of watchfulness, brief spells of exultation, pauses for refreshment, but each spadeful of this friable soil—so free of clay—came away from its bed with next to no effort.

Now, time was slipping by, precious time.

Crouching on his haunches in the hole, intent upon those footsteps in their circuit of the churchyard wall, Dell let his eye rove darkly round. This was no ordinary hole. He had left nothing to chance. For all he knew the sexton's hoard might be contained in a very small box stowed away in a corner. Hence the hole's perpendicular sides. Incidentally, considered as a grave alone, it was big enough to accommodate the tallest man in Barns or, for that matter, the fattest.

With straining ears he listened.

In this hole, on this still night, sounds were apt to strike one's hearing strangely and these new footsteps had a peculiar thud. Not the rector's feet, those. The parson would never take that track. Nor would a smuggler; he would keep in by the cliff. Perhaps a coastguard . . . or, wild chance, the lighthouse-keeper's relief going on duty.

No; the lighthouse was six miles away.

WHOEVER it was, he had halted near the wicket gate, and by this time Dell had ruled out coastguard, smuggler, light-

house-keeper and all. For not one of them would have been likely to moan, or sigh, or blunder against a gate in the moonlight, or melt the marrow in one's bones with his cries.

How that silly gate creaked !

No wonder ; it hadn't been oiled for a generation and it had only one hinge. Rusty old contraption ! As high as he dared, Dell raised himself but his line of sight to the gate was obscured—chiefly by one old tombstone, a little, aged, square, sturdy block of stone cocking badly over to one side after all these years. It was the work of a forbear of Dell's own, and its chiselled lettering, faded now, would have revealed in a better light the tribute it paid to the character of one of the sexton's ancestors. Even by screwing his neck Dell could not see round it ; so he climbed out with little fuss, snatched at his cider keg, secured it to his belt and withdrew to the shelter of a taller tombstone. Unhappily, he must have somehow given a bad knock to the keg's bung. The golden liquor was trickling down his hip.

Meanwhile, the unknown was approaching him. A figure tall and grey, pallid in the moonlight. Dressed in . . . a shroud ? Dell could not make out.

He was feeling the cider cold on his leg ; he had withdrawn the damaged bung, and to stem the tide his thumb was blocking the hole. Rather than lose the liquor, unwilling to lay the barrel down lest it roll over, he chose this troubled moment to raise it to his lips ; and drank and drank. Well he knew how to drink cider from the wood, bubble as it might. Then he managed to force the bung in tight. Stray, darkening clouds were flying across the moon. Dell heard the rector's cock crow. Then he looked at the bulky figure again, and it seemed to be something merged in the shadows, but was solidly paler. The crunching of the gravel



beneath its feet had ceased. There it stood stock-still, bulky enough in its clothes to fill the grave he had dug. The man behind the tombstone was wondering whether to pitch his cider keg at it. If he did . . . would it go clean through it or knock it down?

Still deeper clouds were banking under the moon.

Fred Dell was familiar with the garments worn by the members of the fraternity at Monks Vale, and during this temporary eclipse of natural light it flashed into his mind that the figure by the church porch was wearing the ordinary garments of a monk. Until now, he had not shared Christina's suspicion as to the identity of the man in the lane—but the idea was now, clumsily, taking root in his mind. The cider down his leg had turned icily cold. What a pity to have lost all that! No; he wouldn't hurl his keg at this thing in front of him, not at the ghost of Ned Penn! There was still a good deal left in the keg. Unconsciously he shook it, to make sure. If ghosts should walk in the churchyard after midnight. . . If that—**THAT**—over there in the dark, came nearer without speaking he would lash out with his spade.

"Ned, are you there, Ned?"

It was Dell's own voice speaking, and it astonished even himself: he had meant it for a growl; it was the hollowest of growls. His resolve to speak first had come when he heard the other, as he thought, sigh. But in fact it was less than a sigh. It was the respiring of a breath, a breath held too long and next a deeper intake, by a man not afraid, pondering the meaning of a movement he had heard, and awaiting its possible recurrence among the tombs of this old churchyard.

The pair were about a dozen yards apart.

After a tangible interval the monk answered. He asked steadily:

"Who are you . . . who can you be?"

"Somebody," was the reply, "who is ready to cleave your head if you don't clear off."

In a voice of unruffled calm the rejoinder was given :

"Even of that, I'm not afraid ; even of that. You may do so. I don't want it. I'm tired of it."

What ! Not want his head. Dell had all the sensations of a shivering fit, but he managed not to shiver. His flesh crept as he visualised a headless monk, an upright figure in grey with nothing above his neck. The monk must have seen his stooping gesture and the arm drawn back ; this was possible, for the light had improved somewhat. He put up his hand as if to ward off a coming missile, or perhaps to beg for patience. And in spite of his avowed lack of fear he also stooped . . . as the cider keg passed over his head and fell on to the path and rolled over and over.

Turning on his heel he walked into the porch of the church. Fred Dell was astonished.

On the door of Barns church there hung an old iron ring, older, very likely, than the door itself. It was large enough to be grasped with two hands. Most strangers mistook it at once for an old-fashioned knocker, an error excusable enough, since it was in the usual place of a knocker, within easy reach of one's raised arm. And so, doubtless, it may often have been used. But its purpose was quite different. It was the Sanctuary Ring. It conferred safety upon persons fleeing from pursuit. A fugitive was safe from harm if he could attain the church porch and grasp this ring. Even a highwayman, it was said, had sought succour there from the law in the older days, holding on to it until the last gasp, until hunger and fatigue forced him to sink back into the clutches of his waiting captors. Still more, in past generations the porch had afforded temporary harbour to girls fleeing from parental

wrath, girls fallen into waywardness and unwilling to return home. Less than a hundred years ago an angry father had waited there the night long, while his unfaltering daughter—a most sturdy girl of considerable beauty—held on to the ring of sanctuary. Breakfast-time passed. Neighbours arrived from the village. The girl asked for a drink and friends gave her tea; for food, and this too was given her. But so, also, fared the father at the hands of his own kind friends. Then at last the villagers began to bait the man, who himself fell into tears. In his heart grief and wrath were about evenly combined.

Would he, they asked him, forgive her?

No.

Then, said they all, they would continue to stand by her.

It was the father who gave in first; and none too soon, for his handsome daughter was fainting—a spectacle to melt the heart of any parent. She fell back into his arms and the pair went sobbing home. For many days the fingers of the girl remained stiffly curled, as if she were still holding on to the iron ring of the church door. . .

In all the recorded history of this ring, however, there was no story, no gossip that Fred Dell had ever heard, relating to a ghost seeking its sanctuary.

INDEED, the young carpenter was surprised.

He began to wish he had not drunk so much cider on the top of his earlier potations with the sexton; then, that he had finished off the entire contents of the keg, for there could now be little hope that any would be left—unless the barrel had luckily wedged itself bung-hole up. Even so, it might have a crack in it.

The moon was clearing again.

Dell waited until its light threw up the scene once more

into clear relief, until the shadows became bushes and each bare headstone stood up in its place, and the cobwebs were visible, glistening with dew. He glared aside at the hole he had dug and felt betrayed. Then he advanced a foot, cautiously; next he threw caution to the winds and marched forth with a crudely fearless air, working his shoulders as one who has something to say and means to say it. From between his drawn lips and half-clenched teeth Dell ejected a spitting inquiry at the man on the seat in the corner of the porch, whom he had approached roughly. He asked what was his game. He took the monk by the wrist, almost dragging this one hand from his covered face.

"What be you about?"

"You wanted to kill me! You wanted to kill me——"

"Nay, boy! Nay, Penn boy!" replied Fred Dell, to whom swift illumination had come. This was not Penn's ghost but Ned himself. And he set about trying to appease him, upset by his distress which broke out into fresh words.

"Why should you want to kill me? You! A complete stranger."

"Penn boy! Don't 'ee take on now. I'm no stranger. I'm Fred Dell the carpenter, giving a hand to the old sexton, who's a bit behind with a grave. See——" Dell's hand had gone up to the sanctuary ring. "You remember this old ring, Ned? And the old 'squint' in the wall there behind your head; you remember the Lepers' Squint?" His hand slid down to the iron grille in the wall, while he made the comment as he tried to push it open: "Rusty, I'll be bound. No; the old sexton 'ave oiled it for a wonder. 'Tis the Lepers' Squint, Ned." And he stooped to the grille, squinting through it. "The very same the lepers looked through, donkeys' years ago, while the parson was preaching. It works all right, it works, Penn boy! Penny boy! See——"

Dell worked the grille to and fro, burbling as an elder who seeks to comfort a child.

At last Edward Penn felt better.

He acknowledged that he felt much better and said that he must bestir himself and get back. Dell would have liked to ask the monk's purpose out here, and the meaning of these hours of liberty. It struck him that he must have escaped, possibly for good ; or had got special leave. He worked round to the whimsical question :

"Have they let 'ee out for the night ?"

It was a speculative inquiry that could equally have applied to the freedom of a tiger, escaped from its zoo ; or a sheep, strayed from its fold, or to a lunatic at large. Penn rubbed his face vigorously with both hands, perhaps to enliven it, or to be quit of thoughts overlying his presence of mind. Then he spoke :

"I walked out," he said.

For the benefit of his companion's curiosity he might have added, that his truancy was in part due to a singular incident concerning the prior's horse. Walking in the grounds, he had found the great doors unexpectedly open and unattended ; while in the stable close by, there was evidence of much ado. The horse had apparently been badly stung and the duty-man was helping someone to catch the fly. A trifling incident ! But also, as the monk may now have been reflecting, a great betrayal, for he passed his hand across his forehead.

"When I came up the path here," he added, inquiringly, the detached remark, "you were taken aback, I dare say ?"

"You could have knocked me down with my own spade !"

Dell paused, wondering whether to admit that he had mistaken the monk for a ghost. Especially, the thought flew to

his tongue-end, after that noise in the lane. But he refrained. He announced that he had been about to knock off for a spell to have a bit of supper. Ned might like a bit, too; there was plenty. But they had better eat it out in the open, not here in the porch; then the crumbs would be seen and picked up by the birds in the morning. Dell finished this proposal by making a rather jerky move in no particular direction. Time, he said, must be getting on. It must be pretty well morning already.

They had stepped outside the porch.

Thoughtfully, the monk looked up at the sky. And answered in a voice subdued to the peacefulness of his surroundings.

"One o'clock," he said. "I should say it is one—or thereabouts." He was fixing the heavens with a stare in the direction of Monks' Vale, beyond and in line, as he judged, with the monastery. Not yet very high overhead the three bright stars of Orion's belt were cocked like a falling stick.

"Sometimes," he continued softly, "I can judge the time from the night sky. In some months better than others."

"You can?" Dell whispered humbly.

A brilliant thought struck him.

Penn should stay on as his timekeeper.

Privately he had intended to pack him off as soon as they had eaten, his idea being that it would never do to have him hanging about with such important work on hand. But he had originally meant to bring the kitchen clock. It was the only thing he'd forgotten. Now, here was this wonderful fellow, with his ability to tell the time by the stars. Penn's arrival on the scene was going to be a lucky break after all.

"You can be my watchman, too," he added. "Keep a sharp look-out."

Then he could have bitten off his tongue.

However, his sudden flush was not easily visible, and he hid it by turning away, pretending to look round for his cider keg.

"Wherever did that keg roll?"

"For what," Edward Penn asked him with a shade of humorous malice, "must I keep a sharp look-out? More ghosts?"

A cheerful grin covered the carpenter's ruddy face. "The hearse," he announced cheerfully over his shoulder, "the early arrival of the hearse. They are burying the old boy at dawn."

"At dawn?"

"The first streak."

"Who is it?" The monk's curiosity was growing. "Do I know him?"

"No; a perfect stranger."

"Did he die suddenly?"

"Before you could say 'knife.'"

"Ah! Heart, I suppose?"

"Yes; broken heart."

"*Broken* heart?"

"Yes," came the reply from the man who had not moved an inch, lest the other should take it into his head to raise his voice. But he volunteered the further particulars:

"He bought a lovely house, brand-new, paid a big price for it; then found it was a ruin. Dry rot! It bowled him clean over. Now, Penn boy——"

Dell screwed up one eye, shaking an admonitory forefinger at the monk.

"I'm going to look for my cider keg," he said. "Don't you make a sound. Not a move until I come back. We mustn't

affair, yesterday. 'Tis a wonderful bad job, a wonderful bad job!"

The bewildered friar stood quite still in the middle of the path while Fred Dell foraged on tiptoe, then on hands and knees, for his little barrel of cider. There were no immediate questions left in the monk's head, only a sense of mundane mystery which, being something novel, stirred his forlorn heart. His task was to keep time, keep watch, keep quiet . . .

THEY did not take long over supper.

Nevertheless, it was refreshing. Thick home-cured ham sandwiches, some cheese, a slice of cucumber, several pickled onions . . . washed down with cider. The keg was far from empty and Fred Dell, considerably, had found a little old iron drinking cup in the trough of the pump at the back of the church. This he brought to the scene of his work and they drank from it by turns. Penn sat on the brink of the grave, the carpenter down below. Dell passed up the cider generously, but he got rid of his own in larger gulps than the friar. Oftener, too. He took the trouble to explain why. He had his work to do and must push on with it.

Idly, once in a way keeping a sharp look-out, sometimes dreaming or staring at this man who was digging like fury, the monk toyed with the iron drinking cup. The cider had warmed him and he would have liked to talk. But part of his job was to keep quiet. A peculiarly dull light bathed the churchyard dimly. Heavy clouds were surging overhead. The air was cooler and no longer still. It rustled the leaves of the trees, went whispering among the headstones, broodily moaned in the church tower.



Dell reminded his watchman to keep the sharpest look-out.

Penn was standing bolt upright but looking down. He was screened from the road by a sapling oak that had seeded itself in the wrong place.

"It is a long way from dawn," he said, glancing round the darkened sky. "There is no sign in the east yet," he said with measured assurance. Then he let his head fall forward again, chin on his breast—the position he adopted in the interludes of watchfulness.

Dell urged him to look and listen at the same time. His watchman's attitude made him think of a horse going to sleep.

"Do both together," he said.

And he heaved up another huge clod of earth.

The friar in his time had often looked for the dawn, but hitherto he had never listened for it, though there were, as he well knew, sounds that accompanied the dawn—such as the songs, the cheeping and the flutter of birds. At the risk of seeming voluble he renewed his assurances to Dell.

He said to him : "I should hear the hearse a mile off—on the hard road. On the hard road," he repeated, and was conscious of his repetition—which projected him into the further sentence : "Unless the wheels are of rubber and the feet of the horses are muffled." And after laughing grimly : "The sort of hearse one would expect a ghost to arrive in !"

Several minor sounds emerged from the grave.

They were the efforts of a man who tried to get rid of an attack of huskiness, also to speak, yet make no noise. Dell stood upright, and with his next words effectively changed the subject. He was fingering a discarded scrap of bread-crust, moistening it with the last drop of cider squeezed from the keg.

"Have 'ee ever seen a drunken robin ?"

"I'm afraid," stammered the monk, perplexed, "I feel like one myself."

"The little blighter that gets this will roll all over the churchyard. I once gave some to a hen, in a saucer, one hot summer. The ponds, the wells—brook itself was dry. A sparrow could ford it. Be you listenin'?"

"Yes."

"What 'ave I said, then?"

"About the drunken robin."

Dell had to repeat the anecdote, which he did patiently to its astonishing end, an end more astonishing to the monk because, in the mental confusion he was striving to master, he lost the thread of the story again, and could not be sure whether it was the hen or the robin which had laid, after its saucer of cider, a double-yolked egg . . .

For some moments the friar was left to pursue, in the privacy of darkness beside the sapling oak, his own wild thoughts. Some of them he tried to exclude from his mind. But they followed obscure courses, secretly, after the manner of streams below ground. For one thing he was wondering how sky-larks would behave, ascending from the cloisters. Would they sing with greater rapture under the influence of wine? Would they roll in the air as to the music of a dance, or merely flounder, like drunken churchyard robins? . . . If, at this instant, the moonlight had returned to shine on his face, it would have revealed that his features had an irresolute yet mask-like fixity except for the eyes, which blinked with steady regularity. His eyes blinked and shone in the darkness. There had come into his head, which had begun to ache, the image of a robin with a bill as red as its breast. This thorough-going toper advanced with a lurch, cocked its rogue's head, shut one eye in a knowing wink, opened its bill

as if about to sing—and belched, with evident disgust at its own behaviour.

MEANWHILE Dell was on his hands and knees again, ferretting on the floor of the grave. He hammered with the soft side of his fists, and shoved his jack-knife in up to the hilt, as if thus he could diagnose its solidity and what, if anything, might lie immediately beneath. Then he rose to his feet for a word with his watchman.

"Ned . . ."

No answer.

"Penn boy," said Dell in a louder tone.

A complete and eerie silence prevailed in the churchyard.

"Penny lad . . . what's become of 'ee?"

Dell had no wish to raise his voice any louder, but he was determined to make that solid shadow speak. Tricks like this, in the middle of a pitch-dark burial ground, wouldn't do. He felt like flinging a piece of earth at it. But instead he flung a piece of information calculated to work the oracle. In a noisy casual whisper he addressed the monk again :

"I saw a friend of yours go down the road a while ago."

"Who?"

"Christy Nolan."

"Alone?"

"No; 'with a young fellow she be always with, these days."

"Ah! A young fellow."

"Yes; but I reckon you would hear 'em go along, when you were out in the lane there."

The monk followed on : "Whom she is always with?"

"Mostly."

After a slight pause the monk asked if by 'mostly' was meant 'always,' and Dell, allowing himself about equal time to

reckon up the difference, at last nodded his head affirmatively in the dark.

"Yes ; I'd say well-nigh always."

After a further interval the friar asked his companion whether he would be good enough to take a message to Christina and the carpenter said he surely would.

"Sure, Penn boy ; sure, I will."

The monk said he would like to entrust it to him. But he still withheld it, as one who might be considering either the wisdom of his intention or the burden of the message itself.

Dell was leaning forward on his elbows on the side of the grave, to get a better view of the other's face in the dark, and, of course, the better to hear. He was hoping the message wouldn't be a long one because there was still this matter of the treasure to be seen to. Besides, he hated long messages. He thought suddenly of his own sweetheart, the little school teacher whose parents both he and she were afraid of, and he took this opportunity to interject :

"I'm carrying on with some'un myself, Penny."

It was meant as encouragement.

There came the inquiry with its transient misgiving :

"Carrying on ?"

Then the friar, without giving time for a reply, added with kindly fervour in a cracking voice :

"I hope all goes smoothly."

Smoothly enough, Dell told him ; at least, as far as it had advanced at all. But he wanted Ned to know that he was accustomed to the idea and also the use of a go-between. It was his habit to send messages to his beloved by her mother's housemaid, who was not a bad little wench herself. "Why, for two pins——" he slipped the confidential hint over the heap of soil which divided them. But he fell short of saying

what he would really do, or even like to do, for the two pins.

At last he had the monk's message.

It seemed to shock him : perhaps he was even disappointed, for he pressed for its confirmation.

"You want her to forget 'ee?"

"Yes ; forget me."

"You'd like to be forgotten?"

"Yes," said the monk, "forgotten."

"You don't want her to remember you?" pursued Dell, who felt this to be all upside down.

"That is it."

"I see . . . I see . . . Shall I tell her," Dell then wanted to know, "that you've forgotten her?"

"No."

But the carpenter thought there must be another half to the message ; and indeed there was.

"Tell her that I parted from her without bitterness ; at least, there is no bitterness in my heart now."

"Not now?"

"None."

"But maybe there was?"

"Maybe."

Still wanting this message, which he had begun to find so interesting, eked out, Dell asked : "Anything else?"

"And she has my blessing," the monk finished, and would say no more.

DELL heard him make his way, after they had shaken hands and said good-bye, towards the wicket gate : and he could tell, by its creaking, when he had passed through. For some few minutes there was the renewal of that earlier sound, the muffled tread of the monk's feet on the grass in the field alongside the church wall . . . and presently the louder foot-

steps going up the lane. It had been on his lips to cry out to his watchman a last farewell, but instead he drove hard with his spade at the floor of the hole he had dug.

He had glanced up at the sky and taken note of the wind, and he was afraid there would soon be rain ; in fact, a proper storm.

AS with all storms of the night, there were those had heard it and those who slept through it. Milking was thrown late ; dawn itself was delayed until the skies cleared in broad daylight : the crops had too good a soaking and were beaten down. But the commonest topic was how hard it had been to catch up with the day's tasks. Gradually the parish tongue began to wag about the mystery of the open grave. Next, those who had seen it told of its depth, its exact whereabouts, the displeasure and surprise of the rector.

The grave-digger faced his master beside it.

"What be I to do ?"

The rector's rejoinder, before instructing his man to fill it in, was half a soliloquy.

"You are sure, Hubbles, you didn't do this yourself ?"

It was a disturbing question ; especially was it a disturbing question to one who, at first sight of this yawning pit, had entertained the very same fleeting suspicion. Old Hubbles pressed heavily on his spade, raising himself a little, but not disrespectfully. He wagged his beardless chin. He looked down his nose and his long top lip, which fitted tightly over his aged teeth, and was no longer matched by the shrivelled in-drawn lip below. This was his fourth visit to the scene since breakfast, each successive time after the first with his big spade. And he must have thought the occasion called for the taking of some measurements. For he had brought his tape measure along too.

FIVE-AND-TWENTY years ago this very spot in the churchyard

had been chosen as the last resting place of a villager who was mortally sick. Hubbles, already well on in years, and fallen into perverse ways, had started to dig the grave too soon ; and this same rector, deeply annoyed, had ordered him to replace the soil.

The grave was never used.

As for the legend of the sexton's treasure, this was of simple origin. Very grumpily Hubbles had then refused to acknowledge, to all and sundry inquirers, why with such haste he was shovelling back the soil into its untenanted hole. Gossip soon assigned a reason—he was burying some secret of his past. In time that secret took shape : it became his treasure trove. The sexton himself had continued to keep quiet about the matter, which for long years remained a sore point.

Thus was poor Hubbles compelled, for the second time in his life, to fill in one and the same empty grave . . .

THIS same morning an unexpected incident was to occur in the life of Miss Brett, postmistress of Barns. The coach drew up outside her store. Nothing unusual in that ; it often did, to take up something or put something down. What next happened, however, exceeded in interest for Miss Brett either the thunderstorm or the grave. A little spectacled man in a faded grey suit, wearing no muffler on this sunny June day, got down from the coach.

Of all men it was the piano-tuner—for the first time in his life coming into her store—or would it be to the postal section ?

“Good morning . . .” (she had almost cried “tuner,” which they all called him) “. . . Mr. Frither,” she greeted him, charmingly affable.

In return she, too, was greeted by name, with a glow and a



smile on the customer's face, born, doubtless, of so inspired a welcome. "Good morning, Miss Brett . . ." What he was saying sounded like an apology for not dropping in before. In all these years, never to have felt he dared keep the coach waiting.

"Better late than never," she returned. And while she was giving him change for a gold sovereign: "You won't have heard, yet, about ——"

"Dear me! In the churchyard?"

He appeared to be shocked, but then banished any such appearance with a joke. Of course, where else should a grave be dug, if it was to be a grave and not just an ordinary hole! "Yet nobody is dead? Nobody has died? Remarkable? Most remarkable!" said the gay little man.

Miss Brett assured him that village life was not so dull as it was painted. "Even in Barns ——" she began.

"Lovely place! Lovely place!"

The little man was backing, side-stepping out of the store. "I could do worse than come here to retire," he said. "I've often thought of it," he called to her from the doorway.

"Why not?" she cried after him. "We ——"

By 'we' she meant all the village, she and every other person in it, from the oldest grandfather to the youngest articulate baby. All of them would welcome him to Barns. But the postillion's horn had sounded, and she was left standing alongside a fresh customer on the doorstep, both of them following the coach up the road with their eyes.

Miss Brett walked on air back into her store, the first to retreat from the doorstep.

"That man waved to you."

Louisa Brett's smile vanished. Who? What man had waved to her?

"Why, that little man in grey, the man who was here in the store just now ; that piano-man——"

"Tuner ?"

Louisa's heart was in her mouth. She had missed it, that uncapturable gesture ! Then, the colour coming back into her face in a surge of elation : "Oh yes ; Mr. Frither always waves. We are very old friends."

It would have been easy for Miss Brett to explain why she had gone so pale. She had thought her customer was referring to some stranger. Ugh ! The very idea of being waved to by a man one didn't know. Her legs had trembled. Her knees had fairly knocked together. . .

BEFORE noon that day Alfred Nolan hived two large swarms of bees. The weather was beautiful after the storm, which luckily had done no damage in the apiary. Both swarms were being taken off his hands by an old man who lived down the village and was setting up an apiary of his own. This old man bore the name Hubbles, and was the sexton's cousin. There had always been some doubt as to which was the older of the two.

Rolf was present at the second swarming but could not stay to see the bees hived. In a quiet aside the bee-keeper told him that the two cousins were terribly jealous of each other. He said they did not even look at each other when they met, much less speak.

"Why are they so jealous?" Rolf asked.

"The sexton," answered the bee-keeper drily, "covets James's beard, which, as you see, is a very handsome one. And James," continued Nolan, in this humorous vein, "is jealous of his cousin's job, which he always thinks he should have had." The way the post had been filled a quarter of a century ago had given rise to a good deal of local spleen.

"Why did this Hubbles want it?"

"Because," came the further whisper, "it's so easy."

"Grave-digging?"

"Yes; you see, deaths here are so few." The bee-keeper gave off a fresh chuckle. "Barns is such a healthy place," he said.

Rolf gazed contemplatively at James Hubbles' upright, ancient back. It was square and sturdy. The old man wore

a jacket with great folds and capacious pockets. Squatter altogether than the sexton, he had stiff little legs that seemed absolutely straight, in a pair of very wide trousers. His head was covered with a mat of grey hair, almost like steel points, and it was perched a little forward. This head was never quite still.

Christina came down the garden path.

"What are you two whispering about? Old James, I suppose. Well, he won't hear you," she announced in her ordinary voice. "He is as deaf as an old post. Has father," she addressed Rolf, "told you about his beard?"

But Nolan besought his daughter not to be so outspoken. Many a deaf man, he told her, had a trick of hearing what he was not meant to hear.

Christina dropped her voice to Rolf:

"The old boy thinks it is the finest beard in the parish. I'm sure, if there were a beard display at the local agricultural show, he'd enter it."

James Hubbles, who was standing in the narrow track between the second and third rows of hives, chose this moment to turn around. He shifted his feet in small steps, turning with the deliberate movement of age, and by the agitation of his whiskers they could see that he was about to speak, though no voice yet came forth from their midst. He was looking down at his beard humorously, amused because two bees had lighted on it.

The bees flew off and he looked up.

"You needn't shout," he began, and paused.

"He's heard every word we've said," Rolf said aside, in a low voice.

But Christina shook her head confidently.

"—because," the old man continued quaintly, "I can't hear even if you do."

Christina threw a refreshing smile at him, as he went on :

"And I can't smell."

"Dear old boy ! Rolf, look at that bee on his ear."

"Nor taste——" James Hubbles added to his list of hoary disabilities.

He kept his lively eyes on Rolf, who was thinking how like the sexton he looked except for his beard, and his expression, which was softer.

"That's why," this venerable man proceeded, "I shan't miss the flavour of my honey. What I can't taste, I don't miss. He ! He ! I can't," he pursued, whimsically lugubrious, "even remember it !"

Alfred Nolan, who did not for one moment take his eyes off a particular hive, where there was outside evidence of a good deal of inside excitement, joined in :

"One of the last consolations of old age—I suppose."

"What is ?" Rolf asked.

"No longer to miss the good things of life. To lose all taste and, I dare say, all desire."

The sexton's cousin was nodding his head with detached continuity, as if in full accord with these unheard voices. He began to take the bee off his ear. He raised his arm until his finger was level with it. Christina, watching him, suddenly remembered the episode of the almond tree in early spring, when Rolf had wanted one of the bees to crawl from her finger on to his ; and of his words : "Let it crawl on to mine."

From her father came a delighted cry.

The bees had emerged from the hive he was watching, and were going up in a spiral column.

"There they go !"

The top of the dark column became a swirling cloud, a whirlpool fed from below, where the hive was still discharging its interior life, pouring it out in a ceaseless flow. In countless

hundreds they continued to emerge, the hundreds becoming thousands, tens of thousands—marching in one unbroken phalanx down the wooden slope that formed their doorstep, joining then that upward spout of bees. A population in search, with its queen, of a new and less crowded home.

IN the afternoon Christina was not about.

She had gone into Alderlow, catching the coach on its down journey. She expected to get a lift back in time for tea. Her two girls, Helen and Bertha, took advantage of her absence to come often to the upstairs back window, which was wide open. Once, while standing below, Rolf heard their whispered exchange :

“You dare not.”

“I will, if you will.”

But he did not look up. On his head was an old stiff straw hat and over it a veil, the veil tucked in at the neck. And so that no bee should crawl up his sleeves there was a clip on each wrist.

The ironical flirtation continued.

“You look wonderful,” was said softly up above ; then :

“Tuck your veil well in.”

Next, first one and then a second safety-pin bounced near Rolf's feet—a hint that he had better pin up his trousers at the ankles, so that the bees couldn't crawl up his legs.

“I shan't need them, thank you . . .” he called out to the two girls. “I'll take the risk.” At once he was sorry he had spoken like that. He ought to have appreciated their innocent fun, and laughed.

The only response was the whirr of a busy sewing-machine.

CHRISTINA's father rarely bothered to protect his head or arms, habitually going uncovered into the bee colony. He

even than usual. Before leaving the hive they always fed like mad. They ate as much honey as they could stuff into themselves. This last meal in the old hive counted as storage while they were seeking a new home. And it made them dozy. "Almost too comfortable to sting," Nolan said.

Rolf was glad to hear this.

But because the two girls had made fun of him by their offer of the safety-pins, he hoped that they might presently, from the window, see him surrounded by clouds of bees, and that, thus enveloped, he would behave with appropriate calm.

The opportunity was to come very quickly.

When it did, he forgot the girls altogether. A swarm had been thrown off by a hive next to the almond tree at the bottom of the path. It crossed the hedge at a considerable height, a migrant, living, humming cloud—Rolf in pursuit. Scarcely had he got through the hedge when the bee-keeper's call followed him into the meadow :

"Loosen your veil or it will tear ! Don't go in too near where they settle."

Rolf was enchanted.

Staring aloft through his loosened veil, under the brim of his straw hat, he fell headlong over a stump in the grass. What a breathless, sweating thrill ! Off rolled his hat, veil and all ; behind him followed Nolan's laughter, a loud guffaw and a further shout :

"It's all right. They are coming back——" And presently, when the boy had recrossed the fence : "I was afraid," Nolan confessed, "you might run right into them."

The bees were coming back down over a tree in the orchard. They settled on its lower branch. They had already formed into a pendent solid ball as big as one's fist. This ball grew and grew. It increased steadily, the centre

diminished, contracted, solidified into a mass the size and shape of a football.

Nolan allowed them to quieten down, standing by with the skep in which the swarm was to be carried to the new hive. The skep was a flat-bottomed basket with a round interior and a loose but close-fitting lid. He approached the tree with quizzical patience, holding the skep in both hands, as if it were an offering.

"If you will shake the branch gently ——" he said.

Rolf had now one of those moments of pent expectancy, in which he was wholly alive to a single thing, the thing that would happen next ; when his living interest ran out, as it were, to a single point. His hand was on the branch of the tree. In one second he would shake it. A bee settled on his veil, in the direct line of sight ; another chose a spot so dead centre that if he had but raised his head a fraction, thus tightening his veil, the bee would have touched his nose. A few others droned busily before his face, seeking admission as do insects at a window. They bumped into the net and withdrew. Many still continued to roam round the solid swarm, settling impatiently, then flying off. Those on the surface poked deeper into any crevice between other bodies, head first, in the honey-seeking way of a bee in a flower.

It must, surely, fall of its own weight.

The least tremor to the branch would do it.

"Another second," Rolf thought, "and I shall be surrounded by bees." He would be enveloped with that overflow, the upward flight of those that were not instantly covered and shut in when the main body, shaken from the tree, collapsed and fell into the skep.

"I must then," he reminded himself, "stand perfectly still. No, I must not. My next job will be to pass him the lid."



he would pass the lid to the bee-keeper, who, first of all, would place the skep containing the bees carefully on the ground. . .

As soon as the swarm was in the skep and the cover on, Nolan turned it bottom upwards. This, he said, would cause the bees to assemble in their natural way on the round upper part of the interior.

Nolan stood back.

"Now," he said to Rolf, "you are a proper bee-keeper. I think you could get in a swarm by yourself. But two pairs of hands are always better than one."

Rolf returned him a smile of pleasure. He was feeling excessively hot, and made as if to take off his coat. He had unclipped both sleeves. But his gesture drew from Nolan the friendly suggestion: "I should keep it on until we've got them into the hive."

At this Rolf laughed. "Why, are you afraid that I may be stung?"

"You'll be more at home," Alfred said, twinkling, "when you have been—though there's very little in it, physically, as a rule. I've been stung so often that I think I must have become inoculated against its effects—and even against the feeling. To a healthy person it's next to nothing. But it's an experience, when you have much to do with bees, better over and done with." The imagination, he said, soon ceased to be bothered by something with which it was familiar.

"At least," Nolan concluded, "that's my experience."

Rolf's thoughts flew off in several directions; his fancy and memory were instantly engaged. He would have liked to speak outright with a fine candour, to have said something like this:

"Do you think so? Is it really true . . . is it true in regard to the forms, the bodies of beautiful women?"

For, in fact, no less than that was implied by the bee-keeper's last remark. What was it he had said? In effect, that imaginary things no longer disturbed one, no longer had the power to flay one's heart and mind, after one had become familiar with their reality.

Who, who should be Rolf's fair creature of reality? Who, at last?

What wild and limpid siren with flying hair?

"Tell me," he could so easily have proceeded, in this moment of friendship, this high moment of mutual confidence, "tell me a little more about all this, Mr. Nolan. You see the drift of my thoughts, prompted by your casual remark. About bee stings, you remember. Once the sting is behind—no, no! Ha, ha! That's a good one! I didn't say *on* one's behind. I meant, in your own words, over and done with. Of course—I'm not suggesting that women *sting*!"

And after their ensuing laugh together, Rolf could then have brought up that other trifle, the bee-keeper's remark before dinner about old age, old age and the death of all desire. Tentatively, thus:

"If youth is the time of desire, Mr. Nolan——"

And they could have exchanged some views about that.

HOWEVER, what Rolf actually said emerged from a quite different mental picture. He looked up into Alfred's face and announced that he had once known a man who claimed to be immune from rat-bites.

"He was a professional rat-catcher," Rolf said, smiling.

Nolan returned him the cheerful examinatory look he might have bestowed on a buzzing bee. They were still

standing near the tree, the skep containing the swarm at their feet. Alfred may have felt that he could enjoy a moment of leisure; his swarm was safe; once or twice he had stooped beside the skep as if listening to the diminishing note within: he had even tilted the skep a half-inch or more to let a few crawling bees find their way inside.

"The best rat-catchers," he responded amiably, "are four-footed."

Rolf laughed. "Oh yes. This man had a terrier."

He described it.

It was an old white fox-terrier with scars on its face where the rats had sometimes got a hold. He could well remember how its master used to say of it proudly: "This old bitch of mine——" Once, the rat-catcher had put his bare hand into a black canvas bag containing four rats. He said that rats rarely bit in the dark—if you were careful and knew how to handle them. He had brought one rat out of the bag by the tail, swinging it gently to and fro. That was intended to send the blood to the rat's head and make it a bit dizzy. The man wanted Rolf to see what his terrier could do; but he didn't want to put her to too great a test, as the old girl was getting on in life. She was over thirteen—equal, he said, in human years, to a grandmother of ninety-eight.

Nolan laughed softly.

Rolf described how the rat-catcher got him to hold the terrier by the collar. He wasn't to hold her tightly; just to place his hand on her neck, one finger in an easy hook round her collar, as a sort of reminder that she was to hold back until she got the word.

Much to his surprise the terrier nearly bit him.

"You see, until that moment," he said, "she had been looking up so peacefully—sometimes into her owner's face and then at the dangling rat." She had cocked her head at the

rat with curiosity but no sign of impatience, as if at some novelty in which she was but mildly interested. "Very mildly interested," Rolf added. "Of course I'd no idea——"

"Of course not," conceded the bee-keeper, indulgently. "You hadn't been brought up with rat-catchers."

He dropped an eye to his skep of bees.

"No."

Rolf laughed with pleasant accord, resuming about the rat, which, he said, was to be given a start. He quoted the rat-catcher's own words :

"We'll play fair. We'll give you a start, you ugly brute !" And the rat was then placed on the ground, five yards in front of the dog.

"I never saw a creature move like it," Rolf said. "Its undulatory, leaping movement was most——" What it was 'most,' he didn't say. Perhaps the picture never had an analogy even in his own mind. For it had been at precisely that moment the terrier bit at him and was off after the quarry.

She had no easy game.

The rat, reached in a flash, had turned on her. Sometimes on its hind legs, then back on its haunches, it faced the old terrier, who was past her prime in speed but not in cunning. All the time the rat-catcher himself was dancing round, shouting :

"Wait a bit, my lad ; you see what my old girl 'll do to the bastard soon. This is better than sudden death, I'm blest if it ain't. Don't forget old Nell's age. Ninety-eight if a day. Almost a centenarian !"

The rat, Rolf told the bee-keeper, had seized the dog by the check.

"By the check ! Was it a very large rat ?"

"The largest," said Rolf, whose acquaintance with rats was

limited to that one and those others, invisible, in the rat-catcher's black canvas bag, "I've ever seen."

Nolan whistled : "Phew ! What happened next ?"

"First of all," said Rolf, "the dog stood quite still with her feet spread out, her face sideways, held up in the air, while the rat hung on without foothold. Then she lowered her head slowly, very slowly, until the rat, feeling its hind legs touch the ground, let go and made off."

"What ! The dog let it go again ?"

"No ; she hit out with her paw, sent it spinning, and in a second had hold of it by the back . . ."

### XXIII

ROLF could only look on with an unsmiling face of absorbed wonder, at the entry of the bees into their new hive. Nolan did not attempt to play upon his interest, or to choose these moments of his profound attention even to say :

"I knew you would think it a wonderful sight."

A flat, clean piece of wood served as a gangway, providing the bees with an easy slope by which to ascend from the ground to the alighting board, or doorstep. At first they crawled up it with unslackening speed, going in at the narrow slit which admitted them to this new home, much as they had, an hour ago, emerged from the old one.

The bee-keeper had poured them out of the skep as one would pour out corn. Few of them attempted to fly.

"Too dozy," Rolf reflected, "to sting."

But he no longer thought of them as stinging creatures. He was kneeling forward beside the hive. He felt them on his hands, and did not mind them. Observing how his experienced companion did it, he directed straying bees into the right path, steering them with his fingers.

Suddenly, Alfred's expression altered, and he spoke with mild concern :

"Hello, hello ! What's bothering them ? I was sure the queen had gone in. I didn't see her, though."

All the bees were coming out of the hive.

The issuing ranks were met by those still going on up the slope ; they were like blindly opposing armies. As there had been perfect order, now there was disarray.

"Here it is, here she is !"

"Why, yes ; that's clever of you," said the older man. He

had been searching the ground on the left side of the hive, where he was kneeling ; but it was Rolf, by good luck, who had noticed the queen astray on the ground at his own side.

"I thought it was she, Mr. Nolan. She was going round in a circle with about half a dozen others. And yet I had been staring at her for quite a long time."

"Good, good ! Now see them all turn again."

It was true ; but not quite at once. Not yet did the confused mob, in which scores of individual bees were driving headlong one way and another, march directly upward again. More and more were still emerging from the hive, forced out from behind into the disordered, the utterly bewildered ranks on the wooden slope.

"Go on, your obstinate majesty. Get along !"

Alfred managed to steer the long elegant body on to the board. It was a ticklish affair. The queen wouldn't be pushed. Once, she even took wing, rising into the air about six inches, then settling again. What a moment that was ! For many others rose, too, taking wing in loyalty, by example, or in obedience to some unfaltering instinct.

At length the last bee had gone in.

Two or three wanderers came out, crawled about the alighting step, changed their minds and again withdrew. Nolan removed the gangway, pushing a shutter across the exit. They would be better shut up for a while, he said. The ventilation was good. In the brood chamber they would find five or six frames, each containing prepared comb, and there the queen would presently begin to lay her eggs.

\* \* \* \*

ABOUT an hour later Alfred's wife, preparing tea, made a passing remark to him as he was leaving the kitchen. Indulgently puckering her rather thin face, Sarah said :

"You've been busy this afternoon."

She was shaking out the embroidered table-cover before folding it, meaning to replace it with a new white tablecloth. And to complete her remark on the same good-humoured note, she added :

"The pair of you."

Alfred might have answered his wife most briefly, almost in a word, at most a phrase. "Yes, that's the third swarm today," would have defined, roughly, the sum of his leisurely but not unimportant activities.

He halted in the doorway, wrinkling his face.

This mild contortion showed his teeth, and made his face seem wider, throwing out his whiskers. It was his facial note of interrogation. Once in a while in former days Alfred used to interrupt his curiosity, break in upon his patience, his vague speculation as to what might be next on the tip of Sarah's tongue in moments like this. Of old, he used to say :

"Really, you are too thin . . . you ought to drink more milk." Or it might be honey that he would recommend her to eat.

But he had got used to her thinness.

Sarah, a woman of dauntless endeavour, sacrifice and good spirits, was in the habit of cracking jokes about herself, even about her own face. She would laugh and say :

"My face is nearly sharp enough to chop wood. If it gets much thinner we shall never need a new hatchet."

Her profile had once been her fortune. This fortune had proved to be Alfred, of whom, for a long time, she was equally proud. Profile and husband she now took for granted. And she had many a quiet laugh at both.

SARAH set the sugar basin in the middle of the clean white cloth ; then a comb of honey, then a pot of raspberry jam.



Having gained her husband's attention in the doorway, she was about to say something about Rolf and Christina. But the right words wouldn't come; and if she said the wrong ones Alfred might possibly squash her. He was so ready with that pet sentence of his :

"Don't jump to conclusions, my dear."

A few days ago, when he had used those very words, she had replied : "Why, when you are being harsh, do you call me *my dear*?"

And to that Alfred had replied :

"Of course I'm not harsh. If I were harsh I shouldn't call you *my dear*."

So all that Sarah now managed to say was:

"That *did* seem a fine big swarm . . . from what I could see of it through the kitchen window."

Alfred turned on his heel and hurried off. "Yes," he sang out, "the biggest this year." And he vanished round the corner of the house; she heard his footsteps going up the wooden stairs into his shoe-shop.

Mrs. Alfred went on arranging the tea-things, which now included a bowl of cream the boy had this minute brought from the farm, and some stewed fruit. She had also some whittings to fry.

Her smile had vanished.

If only Alfred wouldn't for ever behave as if he were so marvellously busy . . . he and his blessed bees! She had meant to tell him something interesting, which he would have been pleased to hear. What the rector's wife had said to her today. Had said about Rolf and Christina, and their candid, open friendship. Those were her very words. 'Their candid, open friendship' — "which must be so good for your daughter, Mrs. Nolan, after that other distressing affair she has, I hope, by this time forgotten."

Christina's mother had felt that was a very nice way of putting it. But now, bothered because Alfred had not stayed to hear her bit of news, she set off for the parlour instead of for the pantry. Next, the whittings were not in the pantry. She must have forgotten to put them away after buying them at the door from the fishmonger. They were on the washboard, near the sink, still wrapped up.

"Staring me in the face," said Sarah, aloud.

She sluiced the whittings under the tap.

THE rector's wife had called shortly before the fishmonger. The latter had drawn up his cart some way from the door — not to intrude upon their conversation. But the rector's wife called up the road to him: "I mustn't delay you in your rounds."

And she had, perhaps, glanced at his wooden leg.

It wasn't easy for her to avoid making that glance. For the little woman's walking-stick was a cudgel and a support nearly as thick. But if it was true that she looked at the fishmonger's wooden leg, she made it appear that she was looking all the time at his load of fish.

"Those are fine whittings," she said.

"Very fine, ma'am; and you ain't delaying of me. These whittings 'll keep. They be only just out of the sea."

"I hope you called at the rectory."

He had, and had left there six whittings. The fishmonger had let the two maids have their pick. Each had picked three, and — though he did not tell this to the rector's wife — they had made some jokes about fish which had raised a good laugh.

"Three nice pairs they picked, ma'am."

The wooden-legged fishmonger said this deferentially, looking hard at the little old lady with the stick. He had to, for

bit of fun. Especially when the younger girl was making her choice.

"Let me see now ——" she had said.

She was the little fat maid ; no higher than a thimble, to the fishmonger's thinking.

"Let me see," said the little fat maid ; and, picking up a whiting : "Yes, I reckon this is about its build, though whether husband or wife to your number three, Kitty, I've no idea."

"And I'm afraid," said Kitty, "I can't tell."

"'Tis a female, that'n," said the fishmonger.

And at that they had started to wink at each other, with nudges and smothered giggles, and the girl Kitty had chanted, while he was stumping round his cart :

"Oh, I wish I were a fish  
With a big long tail,  
A mackerel or a herring,  
A winkle or a whale, oh-h !"

—just to change the subject ; and not, in the fishmonger's opinion, before it was time.

"No, ma'am ; my leg doesn't hurt now," the fishmonger told the rector's wife, when that good lady had asked him if he still had much pain. "What there is left of it," he added, and he gave it a hearty slap on the straps which kept the wooden support in place. He had left the other part of it in South Africa, in the early months of the Boer war. And since coming home he had taken up his old fish round.

"You are a wonderful man," said the rector's wife. "You are not a pro-Boer, like some people ; but I hear that you don't hate the Boers a bit."

"Why should I hate they, ma'am? The only Boer I saw close to, to get a proper look at, was dead. Dead as mutton."

"Dear, dear me!"

"Dead on his own farm, ma'am. Like as it might be this farm here, next door. The others defending it, his mates, had got away on their horses before our lot came up."

"Dear me . . . Mrs. Nolan!"

"We buried him close by an orange tree. His wife chose the spot, and helped to dig the grave; she *would* help us. At first we believed the others had skedaddled—beg pardon, gone off and left her behind. But she'd hid in a shed out of our way. Then we saw some of them ferreting about among some trees. And she came out of the shed and said, in as good English as I speak myself, ma'am: 'Don't shoot at those men. They be lookin' for me. But for that,' she said, 'they'd be where *you* couldn't get at them. You English swine!' She called us swine, ma'am. She was the real thing."

"Was she a young woman?" asked the rector's wife.

"About the same age, begging your pardon again, as yourself. I should say about sixty-five, if you'll excuse me, ma'am. She made you think," proceeded the fishmonger, "she ought to have had a beard like her husband. But she had a bit of a moustache. I can see it now. I shall always be able to see it. And you'd never guess what befell us next . . . I'll stake my fishcart." The man stamped his wooden leg twice on the ground as if he were offering his two customers each a guess.

"Tell me," said the rector's wife, leaning with both hands on her stick. She had placed her small basket on the edge of the cart. "Tell me . . ." Her face over her stick, she appeared to be looking at the ground.

"Why," said the fishmonger, "that old woman went off and

unrew herself into the stream. You'd ha' thought 'twere hardly deep enough. It was running as dry as our brook until this morning's storm. But she found the one deep spot. I reckon she knew where it was." The fishmonger gave another buffet with his fist on the straps of his wooden leg.

They had buried the Boer woman, he said, alongside her husband, near the orange tree.

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CHRISTINA's mother, frying the whittings, turned them over in the pan one by one. Christina ought to be here any minute now. The picture of the covered-in shopping basket carried by the rector's wife occurred to her mind's eye. She remembered seeing the end of a skewer sticking out. Sarah smiled, then drew back from the fire sharply, as a splash from the frying-pan burned her hand. Rubbing the smart she exclaimed :

"Phoo !"

She knew exactly, almost to the very words, how the rector's wife would dispose of her chicken. To the person for whom it was meant—someone, of course, a bit needy—she would say :

"Good afternoon, Mrs.—" greeting her by name. "Good afternoon ; I have an extra chicken here. One too many. I wonder would you accept it of me ?" And after making it clear that the chicken was really in the way, and might be wasted, she would add :

"You see, I asked the gardener to kill one for lunch and he has, inadvertently, killed two."

Sarah knew what 'inadvertently' meant.

For a long time, after the rector's wife had first used this word, people had talked about it. It was a rectory word. It

meant accidentally. But then, someone said, it was unlikely that the rectory gardener would kill a chicken by accident. He must have done it through misunderstanding his orders. Which, Sarah thought, came to much the same thing—when you knew the rector's wife.

\* \* \* \*

"WHY, mother, the piano-tuner's been again. . . It can't be his proper time, yet. But that wasn't what I was going to say."

"Yes, I was told he'd been. I forgot to tell you. He was seen in the post-office, and someone saw him in the coach coming up. Where did *you* see him? In the coach going back, I dare say. He must have been quick with his pianos. I wondered why he was here again so soon. It's not the half-year yet. Perhaps something went wrong."

Christina laughed before replying.

She was rosilily flushed from riding in an open trap. She had carried her hat and was wearing a summer frock. She had several parcels.

"Something went wrong in the coach," she said more abruptly. "Such a to-do! Such a to-do!"

But instead of responding immediately to her mother's awakened curiosity she hurried upstairs with her parcels.

"I'll tell you when I come down," she cried. "You'd never dream what a fuss there's been."

She could be heard talking negligently, with a complete fall from her excited tone, to the two sewing girls, who were due away for tea and had waited to be shown some new material she had brought back. From the room above came the murmur of their pleasant voices, then a high laugh and rising notes of appreciation and pleasure. And Christina's voice again at the top of the stairs :

... , just hang in the morning. It will make a lovely dress. You'll be able to get straight on with it."

Then the quick movements of two pairs of feet, shaking the ceiling ; and Christina in the little bathroom—with the still novel rushing of water through the pipes in the kitchen as the new hot tap was turned on.

Mrs. Alfred put the fried whittings on the oven-top where they would keep nicely warm until she chose to announce that tea was ready. A few minutes' delay, to hear her daughter's gossip, wouldn't hurt them. Next she called out at the bottom of the stairs :

"I'll be back in a minute, Christy."

She ran round the back of the house to the foot of the wooden steps leading up to the cobbler's shop : "Tea will be ready in five minutes, father. . . . You two men, tea ! In five minutes !"

"I've been stung, Mrs. Nolan."

Rolf was leaning out over the rail at the top of the steps, showing her his arm. There were two large splashes of blue on the back of it, between the elbow and the wrist.

"In two places," he said. On his face was a smile of achievement. "After all these months. . . ."

"Now you're a real bee-keeper !"

He laughed down at her. "There's no sign of inflammation."

"That's a good thing." Sarah laughed, too. "You'll hardly notice it next time. It's the first time that's so——"

"It didn't hurt this time. Two sharp little stings."

"Yes ; like needles. Just what you'd expect . . . two at the same time !"

"One after the other, quickly." Rolf laughed again, holding up his arm, which he stared at with curious admiration.

So that, Sarah reflected on her way back, was why Alfred was so anxious to be off when she had tried to tell him about the rector's wife. He must have come in for the blue-bag for Rolf's stings. She blamed herself for blaming him. All the same, if he had told her so, she would have understood. Keeping things to himself like that! She felt strangely comforted and returned with a light step, rejoining Christina in the kitchen.

"Rolf's been stung. . . . Oh, it's nothing. You needn't look as if it was you. I declare, if the least thing happens to him your face is as long as a fiddle. I couldn't help but smile at his arm, blue-bagged up to the elbow. Almost enough on it for a week's wash——"

But the girl, bubbling with curiosity, had gone out into the sunshine to find Rolf. Her mother heard her calling his name.

"Rolf! Show me the stings. Rolf . . ."

Sarah brewed the tea. Useless, now, to expect to hear before tea what Christina had been going to tell her. Besides, the whittings were spoiling.



## XXIV

THE episode in the coach that afternoon was to be well thrashed out in the village during the next few days. As gossip, it was first class; for it combined calamity with romance and was imperfectly known. Moreover, it was not fully understood: and it could be added to, in part contradicted, but not denied. Nay! It would endure so long as Miss Brett—as long as the piano-tuner came to Barns.

There were some who said this last couldn't be very long, and that when the rector got to the bottom of the matter—as he was bound to—he would surely get rid of Mr. Frither.

As for Miss Brett herself, it was soon realised that she was giving no encouragement to the topic. No help to fathom the mystery was coming from that quarter. Among the first to broach the subject to her personally was her cousin Will, the cowman.

"Be you better . . . Louie?" he asked her.

He had hardly liked to inquire, for she looked something more than her ordinary self. Her natural self and a bit over. The way she was going about that store!—all the time on the point of sending things flying. Will Brett was not in the store to buy anything. It had happened that he was passing before it closed. He saw his cousin through the window, and looked in on her.

"*Better?*" She stared at him.

He stared back, feeling daft.

"Were you not poorly . . . in the coach, there?" He jerked

his head in the direction the coach had taken, some hours ago.

Light seemed to dawn on Miss Brett.

"Oh-h! *That?*"

Which seemed, to the cowman, more than remarkable; since he, among others, had been told how Louisa had fainted in the coach, fainted on the piano-tuner's shoulder.

He was now in two minds.

One was to say well: that was what he had been told; the other was to make the avowal that he hadn't believed it.

"Good night, Louie," he said, and went.

Never was he nearer having a loaf of bread flung at his head. Perhaps he had realised this. And when he reached home he told his wife about it—and what else, according to report, had happened in the coach.

ALFRED the bee-keeper, shoemaker and breeder of prize poultry, man of many activities, listened to the story of that singular episode in the coach with the least appearance of personal interest. At the tea-table Rolf sat opposite to Christina, and the three listened to her narrative. She did not elaborate it. The whole thing had taken place during the first mile, the climax being reached as the coach made its first stop.

"What a convenient place!" Christina's mother exclaimed. "So near to the farm. Poor Miss Brett!"

A silence had fallen on the table.

It was the same sort of silence, Sarah felt, as at the end of the fishmonger's story about the old Boer woman. Sarah would have spoken again, but she deferred to her husband, who had dropped his eyes to his plate, and now looked up. On his plate was the smallest bit of whiting, the last bit left. Alfred looked up with a bright irrelevant smile, and his wife checked some innocently commonplace words on her lips.

Sarah herself had always thought Mr. Frither was a bachelor, and she was on the point of saying so. But Alfred changed the subject. Perhaps he thought that poor Miss Brett's affairs were not their business.

"Mother . . ." he said, with gay satisfaction and his mouth full of whiting, "this is a lovely bit of fish."

Christina's responsive laugh was not wholly respectful.

"Is it?" she asked which, the mouthful—or the bit on his plate?

Her father reddened, chewed, found it was going to be easier to answer in a minute, and kept the table waiting.

"The bit on my plate."

Said the complimented Sarah, deprecatingly: "Father, why *do* you fill your mouth so full?"

But this remark from his wife irritated the bee-keeper more than his daughter's question. She shouldn't have said such a thing—in company. It annulled the achievement of her cooking. To get over his annoyance he again looked down at the remains of his fish. It was such a little bit. Addressing Christina, who had eaten all hers:

"Would you like it?" he asked.

She held out an inviting piece of bread and butter. Her father forked the morsel on to it; she gobbled up the titbit, and, her mother's unfortunate remark being now forgotten, the table rang with laughter again.

"I'm glad you all liked it," said Sarah. "They looked nice on the cart when the man brought them round. I could tell they were good when I was frying them. I began to think Christina wouldn't be in time for her share."

At the beginning of tea Christina had described how in the coach she had been sitting within easy earshot of Louisa and Mr. Frither, who were talking with surprising animation.

At least, the postmistress was—and the piano-tuner had seemed friendly enough. Christina had felt some surprise that they appeared to know each other so well.

Louie had joined the coach at the post-office, leaving a girl in charge there; and there Christina had got in, too. She had been a second in front of the postmistress, who by quick steps passed in front, excused herself, made as if to give way but did not do so, laughed and went inside. Miss Brett went directly to the vacant seat by Mr. Frither.

So were those two side by side.

Presently Mr. Frither produced, for Miss Brett to admire, a photograph. It was a new print, not yet mounted, of a child in knee-breeches.

"Oh, what a sweet little boy! Your nephew?"

"Son," corrected the tuner. "He's the youngest of five. The others . . ."

What the others were, Miss Brett hadn't waited to hear. The picture fell from her fingers. With pallid face and closed eyes she found relief in a dead faint—on her deceiver's shoulder.

A moment, and she was coming round.

Kindly arms, the piano-tuner's among them, were raising her up. Somewhat staringly her eyes opened, she sighed enormously, coughed a little . . . saw the face of the piano-tuner, emitted a little cry:

"Don't let him touch me!"

And she gave to the tuner a feeble push.

Nor until afterwards was it generally known that Louisa, after recovering at the farm, had returned home on foot. Not that she told anybody. But the farm folk disclosed it, the good people whose offer of a lift home in their cart was refused, and one small boy who saw her on the unfrequented

road she took. She had come home by the Monks Walk. The small boy wished her good afternoon.

She did not reply.

She looked through or past the astonished youngster, with whom she was quite familiar, as if, perhaps, by seeing not she could remain unseen. That could well have been part of her intention, if intention at all she had, to efface the episode from the public mind ; even from her own. For it became very evident that nobody could obtain from Louisa Brett any acknowledgment that she had suffered.

To the rector's wife, who alluded later on to the event, in sympathy, she replied with the same evasive vagueness as to her cousin the cowman, though a shade more politely.

"Oh ! When I fainted, you mean ?" Defensively, she added : "It was hot in the coach."

"Yes ; I was sure it was the heat."

In revolt Louisa blanched. What on earth did this old woman think . . . that it was anything *but* the heat ? Under the fixity of her bleak smile the rector's wife blinked, and leaned on her stick.

"You must get out of doors more, Louie," she said.

"Yes, I mean to. I sometimes nearly faint even in here . . . on hot days."

"Dear me ! Come up to the rectory for tea one afternoon. Your first free afternoon . . ."

THE postmistress, alone again, wept salt tears.

No ; of course she wouldn't go to the rectory, though she had said she would. . . Never would she go ! That would mean telling. She flattered herself she hadn't even let folk think that she was willing the piano-tuner should so much as touch her. As she had hidden her long love from the world's eye, so she would bury her disillusion.

## XXV

FULL moon again. The mystery of the open grave, it had been popularly forecast, would be solved about this time. But the moon began to wane—with nothing revealed. There had prevailed a belief that when the July moon waxed to its roundest, shedding over Barns churchyard a peculiarly brilliant but pallid light, the grave would be mysteriously opened again. Even if watch were kept this would occur. Watching would be useless—for the culprit was a ghost, the ghost of a monk, working with an invisible spade.

Perhaps that was why no watch was kept.

People were saying that a month ago when dawn had been ushered in with a terrific storm, a monk had been out all night, and had returned to the monastery drenched to the skin. They said he had entered in the same manner as he had emerged—by passing miraculously through the barred doors; and that no one in the monastery was the wiser: he had not been missed.

This story gathered colour as well as detail.

Next it was said that old Mrs. Penn's son was ill, near to death's door with a chill—young Penn, who used to be so fond of Christina Nolan. No one knew what to believe, while the demeanour of Ned's mother was in no way helpful.

ONE morning, Rolf had gone into Alderlow with Christina, and they were returning after lunch. They had come down the High Street and turned the corner into the market square, going toward the coach stop. The coach was across the road. Mrs. Penn was already in her garden. From an upstairs

window, where it was her custom to wait, she had seen the coach pull into the square, and as it drew up she came out of her cottage.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Penn . . . come to see tha coach off?"

Christina generally had a word with her. Always much the same greeting, which would bring the reply, with its accompanying smile of achievement :

"Yes, to be sure!"

Today Mrs. Penn was not wearing her old poke bonnet, but in Rolf's eyes she looked no less sweet and quaint without it—in her voluminous frock and tight bodice, with her thin grey hair parted in the middle. Rolf remembered her from his first morning in Alderlow, when she had run out to the coach with a parcel to be carried to Monks Vale. Now, she surveyed him through her spectacles, which were cocked somewhat, their lenses finger-marked. Her look was unwavering and long, with its kindly smile that could easily have started the tears in his eyes.

She had made a little outcry.

"You are the young man who saw Ned," she called out, and admonished him with raised finger. "I've often been going to ask you about it. . . 'Twasn't worth while, I reckon," she said, shaking her finger, smiling a continuous rebuke, until he felt the sharpest remorse, "to tell me—his mother?"

Rolf had resolved never to speak to her about it. But now with spontaneous warmth he said : "Why, yes ; your son and I are old friends, Mrs. Penn."

"There now!"

Her bony fingers were fidgeting with her frock. She smoothed it with the palms of her hands down each side : "There now! Ned was always a good one for making friends. Christy will tell you that."

"Wonderful!" declared Christina. "And couldn't he dance, Mrs. Penn?"

"Oh my!" cried the monk's proud mother, and then: "Just think of it . . . that I should have been laid on my back, on *that* of all days!"

Rolf plunged with happy reassurance:

"I'm sure Ned understood. Mrs. Penn, I remember his very words"—smiling into her face. "I remember how he said—'I am as sure as one can be sure of anything that she meant to come. Whatever can have happened to her?'"

"There now!" Mrs. Penn was triumphant. "I could have told him. Rheumatics! One of my old bouts. That's what laid me aside."

The coach horn sounded warningly; preliminary toots, like a couple of mild and considerate hints, then a third. All the passengers in the coach were looking round at the three people by the cottage gate. But Rolf made no move to go. There were still several minutes to actual coach time. He had launched into a cheerful narrative of his talk with the monk, describing how they had sat in the dark. He mentioned his bicycle, and that neither he nor Ned had a match to light its lamp.

"Mrs. Penn," he laughed, "you should have seen how I jumped when a mouse ran over my foot. Ned had gone in then, and I was by myself—and it was so dark. An elephant if it had trodden on my foot wouldn't have made me jump higher. Not even an elephant," he assured her.

"Bless you! Not even an elephant?" Mrs. Penn seemed pleased by the simple fact that Rolf had jumped his highest on the night he had met her son.

Christina, retreating across the square, called out:

"Have you any news, Mrs. Penn?"

"None!" Mrs. Penn shook her head. Like a child who



has expected a scolding, has escaped it and is happy to announce its good fortune, she shook her head. "No! None! And you know what I always say?"

"Yes," Christina sang out in agreement. "'No news is good news.'"

"To be sure!"

Mrs. Penn told Rolf she always got what news there was. She said the prior himself saw to that. He had written to her twice. . .

This was true.

In his first letter, more than two years ago, the prior had written contradicting a report that her son was dead, begging her not to believe any such thing—unless she heard officially. Ned, too, had written denying it. He had written in proof that he was alive. Afterwards there had been that other letter from the prior: he had begged her not to send cakes to the monastery, where, he explained, they had plenty of wholesome food and were—in answer to her inquiry—all very well.

The postillion sounded his final call.

Mrs. Penn stepped back from her gate. On her face was a placid smile, the smile she always wore at this moment of departure. Christina on the coach step was calling out good-bye. The horses had begun to plunge, the coach was on the move, picking up pace. Rolf, running after it, turned at the same time in order to hear Mrs. Penn's last words. He was to give to the monk, if he saw him again, his mother's love.

"Tell him——" she shouted, pitching her voice shrill and high—"I'm baking him a special cake!"

THE coach had the compact, heavy movement of a good and solid body. It was not too sensitively sprung. It went along the good road with an assured rumble. It rarely jolted, but

when it did the passengers who were talking mostly stopped to laugh, while the silent ones looked up, smiled at those sitting opposite or looked out of the window, as if their thoughts had been jolted, too. The wheels bit into the road wherever it was a little soft after the recent rain. They would sink into an occasional rut made by the farm carts, whose horses had the trick of putting their feet always in the same spot. The coach seemed then to take a course of its own, being after a yard or two pulled into the straight again. This would cause it to swerve sharply ; but as everyone knew the explanation of such behaviour there was no alarm.

There were many bends in the road. They passed between high banks luxuriously overgrown. For a time the meadows would be hidden. The burly coachman had often to stoop lest his tall hat be swept off by the branches of trees. He would throw up his shoulders, into which his neck sank, his body swaying slightly forward—and then righting itself when the danger was past : he was too fat to stoop in the ordinary way. Next to him on a lower seat sat the postillion, a thin man in a big and rakish cap. His horn, which he blew as they neared each village, lay in his lap. Agile as a monkey he was up and down in a flash, one foot on the ascent step, his other leg in the air, while he held on to the topside rail by one hand ; or he would sit with his leathery face—mobile and jocular—turned up to the coachman's wreathed and beaming face, telling him the jokes or the news about the passengers inside.

Inside, the passengers had their jokes, too. Two women, genial and bulky, sat to the right of Rolf, and he heard the one next to him saying :

"I'd like to see his face when *she* gets wind of it."

"Why," the question followed, "be she zummat of a tar-tar ?"

"Tartar!" The first woman cackled; and her friend besought her to hush. "Sh-h, Sally!"

Both of them glanced aside. And Rolf, interpreting this look as if it were a request for more room, moved up, though his movement was little more than a gesture, nearer to Christina, who made a barely effective move nearer to her companion, a young and pretty woman on the other side.

Christina smiled to right and left, asked: "Haven't you enough room, Rolf?" and went on talking, while Sally said broadly and loudly:

"Nay, I be squashing the young man."

Veering her fat beam, without in fact moving, Sally then addressed to her neighbour the frank undertone behind her raised hand: "I shall get a chill down there, where this young man's been keeping it warm. I shall get my sciatica back, I know I shall."

"Sh-h, Sally. You can't say it's a cold day," the other woman returned in a hoarse whisper.

The response was something about the difference between human warmth and any other kind, with the additional sly dig:

"*You* ought to know."

Toward Rolf there came the faintest whiff of wine, a mild reek on the air, only just discernible.

Or was it fancy?

But of more than this mild reek, real or imaginary, he was at this moment sensible. All down the right side of his thigh there was a cold patch. In her remarks about the distinctive qualities of human warmth Sally had spoken the truth.

However, Rolf wasn't afraid of sciatica.

SUDDENLY the coach began to slow down.

What had happened?

Nothing serious, for the coachman's rollicking laugh could be heard as he pulled in his team, the two leaders swinging across the narrow road, champing their bits with a jingle of harness at this unfamiliar halt. Everyone was looking out to see what might have fallen behind. Perhaps the driver had lost his top-hat, or the postillion his cap. . . But no, not that wonderful cap. Anyone who had seen it would know better than to think that. It was too firmly on, too living a part, in its rakish fixity, of the postillion's bullet head. Besides, there to be seen was the postillion himself racing back along the road. He was looking aloft and in front as he pelted along.

Not a swarm of bees, surely! No; that was too ridiculous. No kind of strange bird? Nor wonderful butterfly? Nor owl? No boy up a tree? Yet something, *something* overhead there in branches. There, too, was a small boy, but a boy stock-still in the road and, like the postillion, casting his eyes aloft.

"He's lost his whip!"

"Whip?"

"'Tis the whip," said a delightful voice at Rolf's elbow, where he was standing up in the middle of the coach among the rest. He felt a touch on his arm, and looked down at a small gloved hand. "'Tis the whip," she, the owner of the hand, repeated, removing the hand from his sleeve where it had rested so lightly.

Hanging from a branch was the coachman's whip, and by its weight the handle was pulling the lash gradually over the branch. It seemed as it grew longer—came straight down lower and lower—to be performing a singular antic. Below it stood the small boy, hoping to catch it: he had come out of the hedge, where he had climbed to a vantage spot and also for safety while the coach went by.

The postillion gave the boy a halfpenny for picking up the whip. He then dried the handle which was a little muddy, by sticking it between his breeches legs and dragging it forth. The boy wiped his hands on his trousers knees, each hand in turn, changing the coin from one to the other.

Once more away.

The horses were almost galloping, as if resolved to pick up lost time. Even the talkers inside the coach took on this haste, enlivened by the adventure of the whip—which must, all agreed, have been lifted by the branch clean out of its rest beside the driving seat. To clinch this point someone said it must have occurred while the long lash was coiled round and round the handle. . .

“You have heard me speak of Mrs. Denby, Rolf?”

Rolf turned to his left to greet, across Christina’s lap, her companion on the other side, the possessor of those small gloved hands.

“Mrs. Denby has invited us to the farm, Rolf. She has heard how much you are interested in the bull. Perhaps she will invite it, too, if you get on the right side of her.”

If he got on the right side of this pretty woman! She was less like a farmer’s wife than any he had ever seen. Though why the young wife of a farmer shouldn’t be pretty; and why, at this instant, there should be so evident a lull in the conversation all around them!

He had let go her hand.

It had seemed to lie with careless comfort in his until his eyes, which had been turned to her face, chanced to fall to it again. Then it was withdrawn, as it had vanished from his sleeve before, like something that is fleetingly lent, not for

too marked an approval. Inevitable severance! It was Rolf's feeling, vague, remote and unintrusive upon his actual thoughts while thanking this sparkling little creature for her kindness, her promise that the bull should be present in the yard, or in the shippon when he came to tea, that in moments like this life is lived too rapidly. Alas! Its enchantments were for ever in flight—only touched, as it were, upon the wing.

Yet how long, in all conscience—he might have asked himself—could he have expected to be allowed to hold that hand? Rolf had often thought of himself as a keeper of bees, but never as the bee-keeper; as an owner of land, but had no wish to be the squire; and as a farmer but never, until just now, as any of the farmers in Barns. He had long since perceived the very apparent truth, that if he were any-one else, any other individual but himself, this self of his own would be non-existent—among the unborn.

But there! Fancy eternally outrages reason.

And it was easy, most easy for Rolf unconsciously, lightly, while riding in the coach, to divert his unmellowed heart with not too serious fancies of Mrs. Denby as his wife, their union carrying with it the ownership, the joint ownership, of so magnificent a bull.

She rattled on, flashing, between red and smallish lips, her white and regular teeth. She said the life of a farmer's wife was very trying. One had to be up so early. Still she was often in bed by nine—except on some lovely nights when the sun itself refused to set.

She laughed.

"Then, I suppose," Christina said to her, "you don't feel like 'setting' yourself."

"Oh, I like to 'set' early. We both like plenty of sleep." The coach had given a considerable jolt. "Good heavens!

Aren't we flying?" The horses were treading a respectable measure, kicking up sparks in the descent of a gentle slope. "I always tell David," young Mrs. Denby came back to the subject of sleep—and what she always told David, who was thirty-five years older than she,—powerful, tall, slim, and the very handsomest husband in Barns, drew from Christina the extravagant protest:

"You don't mean to say that you still take your suppers to bed?" She had dropped her voice, and spoke under cover of laughter.

"Why *still*?" was the rejoinder, also in protest.

Rolf somehow felt that David's wife asked this with needless radiance. Moreover, this invisible giant was cropping up in every sentence now. It was, apparently, David's idea that as he and his wife entertained so little, they might as well entertain each other.

"He is crazy," Mrs. Denby declared with complete conviction. But she laughed in jubilant approval of David's craziness. Last night he had eaten the half of a young plump hen that had broken its leg and had to be killed.

"Not just a chicken, Christy—a positive hen."

"And who, may I ask," interposed Christina, "ate the other half of that positive hen?"

A whole coachful of people, as discreetly as it knew how, was hanging on the answer. Rolf had been wanting to make the inquiry himself.

"Christy!"

Mrs. Denby had spoken with a deploring look in her eyes, which passed from Christina's face to Rolf's, brightly searching each separate feature, his ears, collar, even the colour and set of his tie for a little more understanding. Then she regarded Christina again:

"Who ate the other half? *Who?* I ask you."

Rolf was sure that the sciatic woman on his right clicked her tongue with impatience.

Christina vowed : "*I didn't eat it.*"

"No ! — No ! — but you haven't got David to put up with."

The fat sciatic woman laughed, but apparently at something said by her neighbour. And most of the other passengers seemed suddenly to have resumed their talk. Rolf was looking at the piquant and volatile Mrs. Denby's feet, which matched in their shod neatness, her gloved hands. And freshly regarding them thus, he observed that they did not quite touch the floor. They hung down, and first one and then the other would go on drumming its heel against the panel of the seat.

The spectacle touched in Rolf some secret chord.

When she was standing up beside him he had seen that she was rather small, but seated she was a figure hardly less than Christina, though a shade, maybe, more compact.

But those legs !

Lovely in outline, soft, yes, and warm, imaginably warm beneath the dress she wore ; but short !

WHAT, in the opposite sex, governed Rolf's tastes at this time ? What charms, what graces, what qualities of mind ?

For one thing he had no particular illusions about noses. Rather was he touched by the eye and its speech, by the mouth and its softness. The eyes with their dower of speech might be gentle or, oppositely, sparkling eyes. But the mouth, primarily, need but be soft. He was not, that he was aware, moved by one kind of bosom more than another — all young bosoms moved him, but in some the latent qualities of tender hospitality were more obvious.

As for arms — arms generally had their native enfolding qualities.



Chins . . . ?

Well, the wrong kind of chin never went with the right kind of eye; and in this principle of featural and physical combination were involved, it seemed, certain essential characteristics of mind and heart.

About feminine legs he knew very little, next to nothing. Mainly in dreams was he familiar with their resistless spell. And it might well have appeared, from such evidence, he was prone to consider most cherishable those legs that were long — and slender.

\* \* \* \*

At parting, Christina's companion renewed her invitation to the farm.

"Bring him to supper, Christy. Early supper. I'll persuade David," she said, musically laughing, "to have supper downstairs for a change."

"Yes, I should. It would hardly do," Christina as merrily joined in, "for us all to ——"

"No, no! David wouldn't like it a bit." Mrs. Denby reddened beneath happy smiles. Then, observing the parish policeman go by on his bicycle, she stared after him with quickened interest. "Why, there goes the constable. I haven't seen him for ages. He hardly ever comes our way. Do you think," she addressed Christina, "that he has been to see the rector about that grave?"

Two village boys, one of them in a garden, the other in the road, were crying out and signalling to each other: "Hi! Hi! Did you see the cop go by? There's the cop . . . just going out of sight."

Mrs. Denby went on to say that the constable had found out who had dug the grave in the churchyard.

"But the rector," she said, "will not let the police do any-

thing. He wants to deal with the matter in his own way."

Christina appeared to have lost some slight colour.

"You think they really know who it was?"

Mrs. Denby dropped her voice.

"That young man Dell. . . Does the news upset you? Is he a friend of yours?" She was laughing at Christina's changing expressions. And she continued: "You two do look a most guilty pair!" regarding them both in turn. "You didn't help Mr. Dell, I suppose—hoping to share the sexton's treasure?" She bit one side of her lip, as if archly catching them out. Walking backwards slowly up the lane, towards the farm where David, doubtless, would be already looking for her return, she waved to them, transferring her new string bag, containing all her parcels, from one hand to the other.

They waved back.

"CHRISTY," Rolf turned to ask, "why did she think we looked guilty? I shall begin to think we dug that grave ourselves, soon." Jocularly he resumed: "I know what the rector will do with Fred Dell. He will persuade him to join the church choir. Reform him and get him to sing in the choir."

"I wonder," Christina lightly took refuge from her passing thoughts, "whether Fred Dell is a ventriloquist."

"Ventriloquist?"

"Yes. That would account for those peculiar noises we heard up by the church."

## XXVI

THOSE noises up by the church were like soundless echoes in Christina's heart. She was beginning to identify ordinary sounds with them. At night, when darkness and silence surrounded this house where she lived, she found herself listening.

She listened.

Thoughtfully, she would look up from some task, her raised eyes going towards the unexpected tapping of a twig and its leaves against the window-pane. Remotely disturbed, as by something that lay beyond her gifts of apprehension, she would listen to the sound of outside footsteps in their descent of the dark road—approaching footsteps, which, however, did not halt or even pause. They went by, taking their owner about his business, which had nothing to do with Christina.

One day she said to Rolf :

"I wonder how true it is that Fred Dell dug that grave."

"Why?" Rolf took her up flatly. "It is either wholly true, or not true at all. It is one or the other. We know that somebody did it because there was the hole. We saw it."

She laughed, growing thoughtful.

"Yes; we saw the hole, right enough. But it wouldn't be wholly true," she made use of his own words, "if Fred Dell was helped by someone else."

Rolf exploded in contemptuous wrath, and she begged him not to bully her. With touching gentleness she said : "Don't bully me, Rolf."

"It is the only thing to do," he told her, in disdain. "If

someone helped him!" He continued to rate her. "As for that ghost story, don't say you believe that—after all. I should like to see the ghost of a monk, digging with an invisible spade. I would!"

Christina hesitated before replying to him, collecting her thoughts. "Don't forget," she said at last, "you have already seen an invisible monk."

"Seen? . . . I didn't see him. I didn't see his features at all. All that I saw, as I told you before, was his figure—his shadow. And that was substantial enough." He laughed at the idea of a substantial shadow. "Besides, what gave me the biggest scare that night was not the monk, but that mouse."

"Naturally."

Christina's tone was quite non-committal, and Rolf said nothing.

They had come out to a secluded spot, their favourite retreat, near a gate and a stile. It was here they had pretended, some weeks ago, seated at opposite ends of the gate, to keep their vows of silence. Christina was standing beside the gate now and would not get up beside him. He knew why. It was because he had kissed her that last time. She said, casually, when he invited her to get up, that she would rather stand; and that she had been sitting down all day. He glanced down at her, pleasantly. She leaned on the gate, her chin in her doubled-up hands. Her face was pensive and friendly. His private reflection was that she looked very nice, and he told her so.

"I'm so glad," she said, gratefully. She said she hated to look worried. It made her think that people were wondering what she was thinking about. A happier expression overspread her face but she continued to look steadily in front, across the field.

"You look lovely," he said, tranquilly, not looking at her. He was watching a sparrow.

This dispassionate compliment caused the girl to move ever so slightly, and her elbow slipped off the top bar of the gate ; and she had to readjust her chin in her hands. Once more he looked at her, laughing at her slip ; he saw the white marks on her fresh cheeks, where the knuckles had pressed.

"Invisible spade !" he repeated.

She enjoined him again not to get cross, raising her face about an inch from her hands, the better to speak. "Don't be too hard on me."

He retorted, but with less severity than before : "Well, if you *will* believe such a thing."

"Rolf, I don't," she said. Stepping away from the gate Christina made a trifling gesture of emphasis. "It isn't so much the ghost part of it at all," she declared.

Rolf jumped down, in sudden scolding triumph. "I knew it !" Admonishing her he said he had known it all the time. And he continued : "You think that the monk dug that grave himself. You think that he came out of the monastery, and that he will come out again, and down the road to your house. Or that he will confront you somewhere else. You are frightened something like that may happen. I can tell from the way you have talked during the last fortnight. First you think Dell did it. Then he and Edward Penn. Next, Penn himself. And why ?" he incredulously asked her. "To bury himself ?" His voice was pitched in high scorn of her weakness.

Christina had drawn nearer to the gate again where he impulsively approached her. She turned sideways, but his arms were round her neck, and he began to kiss her.

"Rolf, Rolf——"

Protesting, she called him her dear, good Rolf. She

dropped her hands, which had been going to push him away. She half raised her arms, to take him in them, but only took hold of his waist with her hands for a second.

"Rolf! Why are you doing this? Why are you kissing me like this? I am not one to——"

"Not one to what?"

"To be kissed like this."

"Then how," he fell back laughing, as if, and for all she knew, he had been merely prompted to do something very ordinary in either the right or the wrong way. "Then how," he laughed, "do you want to be kissed? How?"

"Oh, Rolf, I don't."

So he promised not to kiss her again, and at this pledge she brightened visibly, as if it were good news, and said:

"That's better."

Next, he qualified his assurance; and, since she must not allow him to think this pleased her, her face fell. In its revised shape his promise was not to kiss her again unless she revealed further wild fears of either Penn or his ghost.

Christina, stepping well out of his reach, exclaimed: "Rolf, how can I help my fears?" On her face was an expression of sweet dismay.

This made him laugh. Though he was touched, Rolf laughed.

They were two or three yards apart.

"Christy," he addressed her kindly, "have you ever, ever seen a real ghost?"

She nodded.

"Oh, come! When?"

She was on the point of laughing. "Back in spring," she made the spirited answer. "When you came to Barns. Besides, I seem to remember you told me you had seen one yourself."

"I?"

"Yes."

Her eyes, on his, had not wavered. Before, he had said she looked lovely; she looked, he now reflected, provoking. This gracious, generous girl.

He regarded her.

"I? When did I see a ghost?"

"Ah! You have forgotten it. That would be, I dare say," Christina pursued dryly, shaking her head, "because it was not a very notable ghost. You told me that you saw it going riding by on the box-seat of the coach . . . the very first day you spent up in the allotment. Your very first morning in Barns."

Rolf hesitated.

His sense of approval of the point she had scored, produced a laugh. He was prepared to take up her answer and attack it, declare it to be an evasion. But he was thrown into two minds by the girl's recollection, which had stirred his own, and he exclaimed warmly:

"Christy! That *is* a long time ago." He scratched his head.

"Only last March," Christina reminded him.

"Last lifetime, by Jove!"

CHRISTINA had occasionally imitated this expression — 'by Jove' — in private, alone in her bedroom, and also at the tea-table. Once her father had caricatured it, making them all laugh with the outcry:

"By Jove! My bees are swarming."

And it had not even been true.

Next, on a different day, her mother, to be in on the same joke, had come out with the subdued comment when they

heard Rolf's footsteps : "By Jove, here's tha young man again."

And to that her father had quickly added : "Sh-h ! He'll hear you. By Jove !"

And Rolf, to crown all had marched in at the back door exclaiming : "By Jove ! What a strikingly beautiful sky !"

"WHY are you smiling like that, Christy ? What are you smiling at ?" Rolf asked. He had turned and vaulted on to the gate.

"Do climb up, Christy."

She got up beside him and they sat there idly, and did not say anything. Rolf was sitting well back on the gate, doubled up, holding on firmly with both hands. If he had let go he would have slipped backwards. He was pondering a feat he had not the least intention of trying : a backward somersault. He announced that he would like to go and live on the equator :

"Not for ever," he added. "For a year, say."

A pleasant idea had occurred to him. This was that he should, if possible, some day in the future, set out and go south until he reached the equator. And there . . . sail round the fattest part of the world. Wondering which countries, or continents, would interrupt the all-encircling sea trip he could not make up his mind which course would be the more interesting : to sail east with the sun rising before him and setting each night, astern ; or to go west so that the sun would rise behind and set over the bows . . . when Christina asked :

"Why ? Why, of all places, the equator ?"

But in fact, to this girl, he seemed the more immediately likely to tumble off the gate. And she cried out warningly : "You'll fall !" Too late, for he had already gone :



"Oh-h, Rolf!"

He was picking himself up.

"It's nothing, Christy; nothing!" he assured her. And he added irascibly: "I knew I should do that."

She had jumped down beside him, and she held his arm while he wagged his foot, waving his leg about. He said again it was nothing, and the first to climb back to his seat.

"That's odd," he said. "Most odd."

"What is, Rolf?"

"Why, I dreamt, only the other day, of falling from a gate. But that doesn't convince me of anything. Not the slightest."

"What doesn't? What doesn't convince you of anything?" She was sure he had hurt his foot. He appeared to be deliberately keeping it still, and rested it on the third bar of the gate.

"My dream."

"Don't you believe in dreams?"

Raising his foot about an inch Rolf replaced it carefully again on its own particular bar—a movement which the girl watched with studied concern. He patted the gate on the spot beside him where she had sat before. "Come up, Christy. Don't make it an excuse not to sit here."

She climbed up.

"Why, of course not," he took up her question. "It proves literally nothing. Nothing whatever. . . Why shouldn't I dream of falling off a gate? I'm always"—he smiled ruefully and, Christina thought, with an unwonted sense of injury—"sitting on gates."

Christina immediately said that she did not see why, she acknowledged there was no reason why, Rolf shouldn't dream of falling off a gate.

"No earthly reason," he said. He slightly raised his foot again.

ROLF did not tell the girl beside him the other part of his dream.

She was in it.

In its opening phase they were side by side, as they were seated now. Then they had begun to wrestle together, amicably at first, in fun and with delight ; and at last, passionately : but in the dream, when Rolf fell, he had not sprained his ankle. . .

Rolf now denied that his ankle was hurting very much. He extended his leg.

"Look. The foot moves. It is all right."

But to Christina it was anything but all right. She was glad when he stopped moving it as if it were something separate and did not belong to him. In his impersonal manner, his detached point of view when alluding to himself, she found nothing new. So often it had amused her. But in this instance she was feeling that it took him away from her. This made her unhappy ; and she felt that she would never belong to him.

"Don't you agree with me, Christy ?"

Christina always did. Had he not taught her to agree with him ? Recovering from her hesitation, as if she herself, in fancy, had been on some little trip, the girl asked :

"What about ? The foot ?" She smiled down at it, and realised that she had said *the* foot, not *your* foot.

"My foot ! NO—My trip. The equator !"

With forced archness she suggested that he intended, perhaps, leaving his foot behind.

He begged her to forget his foot. Her constant reference to it was disturbing a theory, he informed her, which he was trying at this very instant to put into practice.

Rolf briefly explained this theory.

Its gist, he told Christina, was that one could get used to

almost any kind of sensation. And its author, the teacher of the theory, was either Aristotle or Diogenes. Diogenes, he fancied. A Greek philosopher.

These strange names fell on Christina's ears, literally, as Greek. It would have pleased her to ask more about the second-named personage, introducing, perhaps, some little joke; but she did not dare. What Christina felt she would like to ask was: "Is this Diogenes some old gentleman friend of yours? Someone you know in the north of England?"

Invariably Rolf welcomed her jokes. But she felt sure this was not a suitable moment to make the interjection.

"He was said," Rolf was proceeding, "to live in a tub——"

Whereupon another little joke occurred to poor Christina. It was on the brim of her lips. Her passing thoughts were of broody hens. Perhaps Diogenes had lived *under* a tub. And almost she had asked the joyously irrelevant question: "Was he a fowl?"

Too bad not to ask it! It would have refreshed their spirits so. However, instead she let slip the more sober inquiry:

"Rolf, what sort of a tub?"

Then she wished she hadn't spoken, for Rolf had made a clicking impatient noise with his tongue.

"Christy . . . does it matter what sort of a tub? A bath-tub, if you like, a wash-tub——" He stopped, thinking of other possible tubs, and mentally ruling out dustbins.

"A rain-tub," Christina put in helpfully. "They are tubs of a goodish size, Rolf."

Several very large rain-tubs occurred to her mind's eye. Full of water. She visualised their exact positions under the eaves of various houses in different farmyards. But Rolf was impatiently getting down from the gate. And he stood on one foot. Since he was so hostile to any reference to his

injured foot, dare she refer to the other one—his sound leg? Surely she could safely, without incurring his displeasure, ask him: "Is that one enough for you to stand on, to balance on?" And she might at least offer him her arm. She stood beside him, at a loss where to look—at his face or at his foot. The one reflected the pain in the other.

Christina said in a very small voice: "Rolf, Rolf, may I not help you?"

She had hardly breathed it; and he took no notice. He might not have heard. She felt he must be very angry with her.

She was suddenly horrified by his words.

He was swearing . . . swearing dreadfully, invoking the names of Almighty God and of His Son.

"God!" he said, in a deep and feeling voice. "Jesus . . ."

"Oh! Rolf. Don't blaspheme. Please," begged Christina, "don't blaspheme!"

"Christy, if I don't," he replied calmly, "I shall groan."

"Then groan, Rolf. Dear, dear Rolf! Rolf, darling, groan!"

He groaned, dismally, and she took him into her arms.

With her right arm tight round his waist, Christina held the boy close up against her body. Her left hand was a little higher, and with it she pressed him to her breast. There should be no doubt this time of her welcome, her complete hospitality, nor of her tenderness. This was no time for kisses, but he should kiss her when he chose, as much as he would, and how. Let him go, if he pleased, to the equator by and by, but he was hers for these moments.

She tried to imagine his thoughts.

Christina had her back to the gate; Rolf's cheek was against hers. He was looking over her shoulder into the meadow. He was regarding a flock of sheep. The sheep

had been startled by his fall from the gate and had scurried away.

"Christy . . ."

"Yes ?"

"Those sheep are coming back."

The girl screwed her head half round to look ; then desisted. Their cheeks were no longer touching. A moment later, they touched. She was sure it was Rolf, not herself, who had made the fractional movement.

"Sheep always do," Christina said.

Again silence.

Passively, gaining confidence, the sheep drew nearer, watching them. Rolf closed his eyes. But he could still see the sheep : in his mind's eye those sheep, more and more sheep, continued to assemble round the gate.

The girl thought of the boy's foot.

She forgot his foot, and was conscious of a regional warmth other than the warmth of her cheeks. Her breasts were transfused with little thrills. She felt that her limbs were no longer her own. She became aware of the intrusion of her conscience, which began to conduct a moral war against this delicious strumming of her sensibilities. A small, private war. She thought of Diogenes, picturing his life in his tub, to see what that would do. Very little !

And coming back to the boy in her arms, she forgot Diogenes. . .

AFTER a while :

"Christy."

She answered : "Yes ?"

Rolf wanted to know whether she could feel his heart beating. "To me," he said, "it seems to have stopped." But

his laugh was quiet and reassuring. "You ought to have felt how it beat in my foot. Now, I can't feel it at all . . . my foot either."

Christina, who could recall the turmoil in his chest, hesitated. She delayed her reply so as to judge the more accurately, assisting her judgment with the smallest extra pressure of her breasts.

"I think so. Yes; I can feel it." How queer her own voice sounded in her ears! "It is there all right," she said in the same unrecognisable voice. She mustered her forces, determining to speak in her ordinary voice, then changed her mind and said nothing.

"WHAT I cannot understand, is why you are so afraid of Ned Penn. You told me yourself you wished you could have gone to see him. Though what good that would have done——"

Rolf's words, while his arms were still round her, tailed off. And Christina immediately thought:

"So that is what he has been thinking about all this time."

But this was nowhere near the whole truth. For Rolf, until he unexpectedly spoke, in a voice so near as to surprise her afresh, had been, indeed, lost in a sober but none the less engaging comparison. He had been comparing the softness of Christina's body and of her limbs, with that of Anna. And his final judgment was that they were if anything softer. They were also rather fuller. Which would doubtless be, he had reached the sage, speculative conclusion, because they were maturer. Christina was an inch or two taller. Her hips were higher. Much the same height as his own. But not quite.

"Besides, Christy, they don't admit girls to the monastery, surely? Not even into the outer grounds."

"If they are relatives, they do. Mothers, sisters, nieces can go up to the gates."

"Why, how does a monk have a niece?"

Christina laughed, with one hand straightening her hair. "Can't she be the daughter of a monk's married brother or sister?"

"Oh yes," said Rolf, looking at her hair. "Your hair is all right. Tuck that bit in under your hat. That's right—now the bit over the other ear. Doesn't a girl's hair look funny when bits stick out?"

"Awful."

"My leg aches up to my knee . . . but not badly."

"Oh, Rolf, I'm so sorry!"

"Don't worry, you can't do anything."

"I could carry you on my back."

"I believe you would."

"Why not?"

He considered the possibility in silence. Twice he kissed her. On her chin and one cheek; then Christina, who believed they were kisses not of love but of gratitude, and had closed her eyes, felt his mouth on hers again. Still, she resisted an impulse to hold it there.

"Rolf, we must go."

"Not yet."

"Yes."

"Not yet."

They did not stir.

Christina described to him the visits made by relatives to the monks. A whole family, she said, was sometimes to be seen sitting out on the seat near the big door. The seat Rolf had sat on. They would sit there in a row. Some of them arrived overnight from a long distance. They were allowed to sleep in the guest-house close by, and were given supper

and breakfast. They were called soon after five o'clock in the morning, and waited for the monk to come out. He generally came out after the first prayers.

"Those sheep, Christy," said Rolf, "are no longer interested in us. They have all moved away."

This time the girl made no movement to turn round and look at them. She gave a faint laugh. And she replied: "Perhaps they are bored with us." Then, lest her reference to boredom might be misconstrued, Christina made an explanation. She began by saying that she had not turned to look at the sheep because—because, she nearly said, she did not want to disturb his foot. But she finished honestly: "Because I am so comfortable."

He did not smile, nor take his eyes off the sheep, which continued to wander farther off down the meadow, comfortably filling their bellies with grass.

"Do you ever dream of Edward Penn, Christina?"

"I have, once or twice." A deep blush overspread her face. "Yes; I think so," she subjoined to her admission.

"All right. You needn't blush like that."

"Am I?"

Rolf helped her to cover this confusion by laughing, with the brief interrogation: "*Are* you?" He added flatly: "I dream." And with snorting hostility, but as if with relief, he acknowledged: "Like fury!"

Christina became disingenuous.

"But not of monks?"

She was laughing, and he found her amusement infectious.

"No."

She was almost prompted to suggest: "Of nuns, perhaps?" But her innocence was not sufficient, and she left this unasked and looked at him, waiting for his next words, her heart beating slightly faster. Then she had pins and needles



in her thigh, and she moved ever so little in his embrace. This movement caused the sensation to spread down her leg, and she lowered her face, looking at the ground. It was a flushed and shadowily troubled face, under the not very wide and curled-up brim of her pointed hat, which was pinned on to her abundant hair at a slight tilt. With its long and straight-up feather, it had made her feel very smart when she put it on.

Christina looked at the ground, speaking slowly, affecting a light, almost frivolous manner. "I did have one dream; one particular dream," she said. "'Twas something awful." Penn had appeared to her at dead of night.

Rolf asked, as a monk, or as he used to be?

"As a monk," replied Christina.

"Where?"

"In—in my bedroom." And she asked, laughing: "Where else do you think I should be in the middle of the night?"

She said no more, but Rolf guessed she would go on; and to prompt her he assumed a casual tone. "I dreamed of him myself, once. And that was in a wood. The wood behind our house."

"Uncle's house?"

"Yes, across the ford, on the other side of the brook." Rolf interrupted himself, appearing to spit something off the edge of his lip, the chewed remainder of a spear of grass. "He arrived there with a girl."

"Me?"

"No, no. A chamber-maid at the 'Bull Inn' at Alderlow. Named Polly."

"Polly?" Christina said. "I know that girl. Or I know of her."

"What do you know of her?"

"Oh, nothing. Only that she is there. A bonny sort of maid. One of the three maids there. Biggish girls. Rather fast. At any rate the barmaid is said to be. Perhaps she isn't, I don't know. Polly's the shortest of the three. Rather dark, with very soft eyes and lovely black hair. But how," Christina asked with amused curiosity, "do *you* know her?"

"She called me in time for the coach."

"Oh, yes. That was where you stayed the night of your arrival."

"The morning," Rolf corrected. "Only two hours."

"Oh, yes. I'd forgotten. But what about the wood? It doesn't sound like Ned, to be out with a chamber-maid. Nor like you," quickly added Christina. Laughing, she examined Rolf's face; then looked past him, over his shoulder. "Did you all go for a walk in the wood?"

"Oh, no."

"What then? You were asking me about *my* dream. What about yours? What did Ned do?"

"Oh, he went back to the monastery."

"With Polly?"

"Oh, no."

"Ah!" exclaimed Christina with the most lively interest. "So you were left alone with Polly, and she's a minx. Did you take her for a walk in the wood?"

Rolf burst out laughing.

"No."

He said no, because he chose to consider that it was Polly who had taken him, not he her. He remembered her invitation, her words about the cowslips: "I know where the cowslips grow, a great bed of cowslips—" But he did not tell Christina this. He assured her gravely that Polly, after the monk's departure, had gone home to the "Bull Inn."

Christina laughed happily, but with a good show of sympathy. "How disappointed you sound! Poor Rolf. To be left alone in that dark wood!" She rippled with humour, appearing to have forgotten altogether the affair of herself and Penn, in her own dream.

It was for Rolf, now, to turn the tables on her.

"We had got"—he affected a cold inquisitor's tone—"as far as your bedroom. At least, the monk had."

In an equally good voice of pretence, but jocularly, Christina retaliated: "Had he? Oh yes, I'd told you that much. Well, that was bad enough. Father would have been mad about that. Mother would have had a fit. I nearly had one myself."

Rolf tried coaxing, but she wouldn't tell him any more.

"Go on, Christy; I told you mine."

"Why, that was nothing to brag about."

"I didn't brag."

"No, I didn't mean that." Christina hastened to assure him she did not mean that. "Of course," she said, "you didn't brag. But what bit you told, I had to drag out of you. I don't say it wasn't interesting, but you wouldn't call it exciting. About, I should say," she described it, dropping into a whimsical vein, "like a Sunday morning walk home from church. Mine, by comparison, was both exciting and dreadful. Dreadful and shameful. Oh! Why ever did I mention it?"

Her bright mood had changed to one of grief, which she was suppressing.

"Christy," he hazarded, "it might do you good to tell me."

"It would, Rolf. Oh! It would."

In Christina's dream there was love with the touch of death, in the cold and clammy atmosphere of the grave. Few

dreams had she experienced in her life, so far, to shock her modesty ; and not one, hitherto, had filled her heart with the peculiar kind of nocturnal dismay left by this one.

Rolf could gather that the scene had changed from Christina's bedroom to the churchyard. In the transitional way dreams have.

But she did not tell him what happened before they left her room. Penn had lain down beside her. He took her in his arms. Instantly, his garments had crumbled away. And she said to him : Oh, Ned, you will get a cold."

"Then let us prepare," he said.

"Prepare for what, Ned ?"

"Death."

Then, somehow, when they stood by the brink of the grave, Penn was again wearing a hood and his long robes. . .

WHILE she paused in her narrative Rolf elected to kiss Christina's lips. Cheerfully he asked : "What next ?"

"We jumped in."

Rolf felt her shiver, it was the most inward, secret shiver, and he asked her, was she cold ? Then, as she said yes, he declared naïvely : "Then I'll warm you, Christy !" And he began to kiss her face all over. He directed her to wait before telling him the remainder, until she was warm. And at last, when there were tears on her face and she was smiling again, he said : "Now, you can go on." She thanked him, saying it was so good of him, and he retorted :

"Nonsense, Christy. I liked it myself. Kisses are lovely. . . All right, you jumped—you jumped," he prompted her, "into that blessed grave."

"Yes." Christian spoke as if this were the end of the affair. But it was not. And she had deviated, too, from the strict truth in saying that they had jumped. The monk had

lifted her into the grave. She wanted to run away from him, but could not, because he had her nightgown in his pocket, and for other reasons which she could not recall.

The monk had placed her beside him in the grave.

She could remember the sound of his voice, softened to a whisper, lest they should wake others lying there in the churchyard: "Pull a little more clothes on us, Christina, a little more clothes."

And they had pulled more earth on to themselves until their mouths, their noses, their eyes—were covered.

IN affected carelessness Rolf inquired: "Well, did you stay there?"

She nodded her head, the point of the vertical feather in her hat shaking like a spike. "Yes."

"Rubbish!" he said. "Christy," he said, laughing—"how could you have? You wouldn't be here if you had." Squeezing her, he kissed her. "This in my arms is alive and solid enough." He touched her breasts, testing their aliveness, and was startled again by their warmth and softness. "And this"—her waist—"and these"—her hips—until Christina could well cry out in her shame and delight.

"Dreams are so mad, Christy," Rolf went on with his comforting.

"So unreasonable," he said. "One is so helpless. . . We dream of what we are afraid and we are afraid of what we dream. One gets into a state," he soliloquised cheerfully, in a more enlightened tone, as if disclosing something within himself, "when one can no longer rely on the power of reason. Christy, I used to be *so* afraid," he made the confession.

Christina listened without speaking.

"Of what, she wondered, had he ever been so much afraid?"

Still assuring the somewhat surprised girl that reason was

of doubtful value, sometimes to be distrusted, at any rate not used too much, and that she should let her fears die out naturally, as they would if she laughed at them, Rolf added: "You know, it is no good reasoning with fear. One cannot reason fear away. One can only change one's feelings about it—perhaps gradually. One's brain goes on, and on, until every fresh thought becomes but another aspect of the same problem. Lately," he said, dropping his voice, "I have ceased to reason with myself as much as I used to do. I'd like to stop altogether." He laughed easily. "Give it a good rest!"

Soundly, he kissed Christina's face several times.

In renewed ardour Rolf kissed her. On her mouth and her throat, as if giving reason an immediate, much needed rest. And Christina, who had carefully followed the thread of his talk, did not know quite whether to be happy or dismayed.

"Christina, let us kiss! Let us kiss!"

With a rising tide of feeling she answered his kisses, returning his indelicate embrace.

\* \* \* \*

They were making their way home.

"Rolf . . . can you manage to dig your legs into my sides a little less?" Breathless under the burden of his weight, the girl tried to laugh. "They are terribly hard," she said, feeling miserable because she would not be able to carry him much further. And she struggled on with an attempt at humour. "I am sure I haven't got such hard legs as yours."

She hadn't, as he knew.

As she directed him, he adjusted himself, slumping down more.

"That's better," she said.

But in another minute, after covering a few more yards, she had to tell him that he was throttling her; and next, when

he put his hands on her shoulders, that he was pulling her off her balance. Could he lean forward a bit ? Then Christina herself leaned forward, progressing heavily at a deep stoop, like an old hunchback, and he nearly shot over her head.

"Put me down, Christy. Let me get down," he begged her. She was forced to agree ; he was too heavy for her.

"Oh, Rolf, I'm so sorry. I wish I had your strength ; or that I had sprained my ankle instead of you."

"Perhaps it's not sprained," he said, pale ; and he hopped a yard or two while holding on to her, then sat down in the hedge, beaten. Christina was red in the face, but deep in her eye-corners, near her nose, there were whitened spots and she was white across her upper lip.

Rolf waited, sitting in the hedge while she went for help.

When Christian returned she was accompanied by Fred Dell, whom she had met at the bottom of the lane. The big fellow carried Rolf home on his back.

"'Tis a real sprained ankle, no doubt," Dell said confidently. "But you be'ant," he added the friendly assurance, "as heavy as a sack of new flour."

Rolf thanked him, wondering why Dell distinguished between new flour and old, but he did not ask. He had now forgotten even Christina, who had gone straight home. The young carpenter, who appeared to be chewing tobacco, was very friendly ; they chatted at intervals, and Rolf explained, for the other's amusement, how he had accidentally fallen off the gate. In return Dell told how he had once ridden a horse that had baulked at a fence. But the animal, he said, didn't sprain its ankle ; it had broken its neck, and his own too, nearly. Rolf found himself laughing, in spite of his aching foot, at his companion's heartlessly funny account of that calamity.

## XXVII

HELEN, with her dark curls and her older ways, had always considered that the difference of one year between herself and Bertha marked a tremendous gap. Besides, as senior dress-making assistant she got more pay; her wages were half a crown higher, and that gave her self-importance. Emotionally, she felt herself more on a level with the girls in the village who were sixteen than with those who, like Bertha, were only fourteen. Another thing to mark the difference: Bertha was fair and her hair was straight.

Each had her own sure instinct for the arrival of Rolf, a perception infallibly right for the way he opened the side gate, closed it and came into the apiary—a certainty as to his footsteps on the sidewalk round the house. Helen at her own side of the workroom would toss her head. When Christina wasn't looking, and even sometimes when she was, she gave it this toss as if shaking out her curls. Then to make the movement seem natural she would clear, with her forefinger, one deep dark ringlet from the side of her face.

But Bertha, when Christina was present, made no sign. Only when the two of them were alone did she look up, to rest her eyes on her companion for one questioning moment—a look which drew no response, for Helen would pretend not to see it.

"Really, Bertha," Helen had protested at last, elderly, indulgent, superior, "I do wish you wouldn't for ever stare at me when that young fellow comes round. You give me the creeps



—almost.” She said ‘almost,’ to lessen the sting of her reproof.

Bertha asked gravely : “Then why, every time, do you shake your head like that ?”

“Like what ?”

Bertha showed her, imitating the toss with her head of fair hair, straight hair that was hardly any longer, all round, than a deep fringe ; so that Helen laughed.

“Why, to clear my hair from my face. What else ?”

Bertha knew better. But she said nothing, secretly resolving not to look up again when Rolf came in at the side gate. Or when he walked round the beehives, whistling. Sometimes he didn’t whistle at all, but once he began he never stopped. Tunes after the style, it always seemed to Bertha, of Ta-ra-ra-Boom-de-ay with variations—until one day Christina’s father called out in a loud voice across the apiary : “I dare say, young man, my bees would like a change of music.”

That had caused Rolf to be quiet for some time, but by and by he had resumed with a hymn tune, an improvised version, apparently, of “Rock of Ages.” And stopping all of a sudden he sang out the inquiry :

“Are bees subject to sound, Mr. Nolan ?”

“What sort of sounds ?”

“To music. Do they like it, or dislike it ? Or don’t they hear it at all ?”

“They don’t like thunder, I know,” answered the bee-keeper. “They hate it.”

“Well,” Rolf cried, “I’m not thundering,” and set off whistling another dance tune, which he kept up until a fresh idea struck him.

“Of course, Mr. Nolan, it may be that my whistling sounds to the bees like some tremendous orchestra.”

“Possibly.”

"You've never tried shouting into a hive, I suppose? As a test of its effect, I mean."

"Never. And I shouldn't," the bee-keeper replied, chuckling, "advise you to."

"Oh, no," Rolf gave the assurance, earnestly.

"They'd sooner, I dare say," dryly went on Nolan, "you continued to whistle to them. Though perhaps the queens, for a change, would prefer a song——"

At which point all three girls in the sewing-room, Christina, Helen and Bertha, who had heard every word through the open window, laughed quietly together. The two younger ones looked up at Christina, who returned their smiles. And that, so far, was all right. But of course Bertha must then spoil it by turning upon Helen those innocent eyes of hers. Helen had promptly tossed her curls, furious, in the presence of Christina, to be looked at like that.

Now, Helen chose to add to her remonstrance. Calmly she proceeded where she had left off.

"You know, Bertha, you do remind me of the almond tree. You remind me of it ever so." She was sewing a silver waistband.

Bertha knew which almond tree. There was only the one. It was at the bottom of the garden. Wondering how this could be, how she could possibly be considered to resemble an old almond tree, though that might be flattering enough, especially in spring when it looked—well, lovely, Bertha allowed some seconds to elapse before answering. She kept her eyes glued to her work, a piece of hemstitching, and said slowly :

"I don't see how you can say I am like that tree, or any other tree."

"I didn't."

"It sounded like it."

"Listen, Bertha dear," enjoined the older girl. "You should really listen. I said you *reminded* me of it."

"How?"

"Well, you know what it is like without its leaves, or its blossom—bare, in winter. Just an old-fashioned question-mark."

Bertha winced. "But I'm not bare in winter. At least," she recovered, defensively laughing, "you have never seen me bare, either in winter or summer."

Helen softened her truculence with a shade of disdain. "No, dear, and I hope I never shall." Standing up, she tried the silver belt round her own lithe waist. There was an inch to spare, which appeared to please her, and in self-approval she glanced across at Bertha, who was plump. "Besides," she continued, seeking now perhaps some self-justification, "I always thought you were for the monk."

This was a dark hit, and Bertha was silent. And her answer, when she gave it, was that she preferred to be neither for him nor against him.

"And I haven't," she added, "changed one bit."

"But you were always loyal to him, Bertha. Loyal to his memory, loyal to the rosemary bush. And you know what that stands for. Remembrance."

"Well——"

"Well, don't you want it to grow, Bertha?"

"Of course I want it to grow. Isn't it growing?"

Indeed the rosemary was growing. This shrub, once so small a sprig, was now a healthy bush with many shoots. It grew and thrived in a patch of soil by itself. It filled with its perfume the air near the wooden stairway of the cobbler's shop.

"I suppose," continued the older girl, "you know who waters it?"

Bertha had to acknowledge that she did.

Rolf himself had watered the rosemary. Rolf had watered it during a brief period of drought. Both the girls had witnessed this. They were going home to tea, and they had seen how he had drenched it with diligent care.

"I suppose," added Bertha, at last, "he only did it to help. To help with the watering."

Helen, whose face had darkened, scoffed. "At least," she answered, "he could have picked on some other plant. Why did he not water the fuchsias, and leave the rosemary alone?"

To this Bertha had nothing to say.

"Mark my words," Helen addressed her, trying on the silver belt again, puffing herself out a little to make it fit. "He is no true lover."

"Oh, Helen!"

"No real lover would help to keep alive a plant in memory of another man. He would rather trample on it."

"Helen!"

"Try this on"—holding out the silver belt. "I'll bet it won't go round you."

Bertha's healthy young waist was too large by several inches.

"Nowhere near it! You are too fat."

DOWNSTAIRS the bee-keeper laughed. Nolan laughed at this very stage in the discussion between the two girls. He might have heard it all, his laughter was so timely. He had been coming into the house and going out again, regularly. For some time he had been plodding to and fro.

But he was only laughing over a joke with his wife. However, as if reminded suddenly of themselves, and of the tasks before them while Christina was out, the girls made a show

of settling down to work busily. Helen put down the silver belt, which was finished, and went over to the sewing-machine. It was a treadle machine, and she set it going with plenty of action, though there was no material in it.

The more gentle Bertha, still at her hemstitching, stared at her and then regretted it. All she said was :

"That's a funny thing to do."

She had been unable to resist the challenge of that spectacle—Helen, working an empty sewing-machine. Thus, sometimes, they provoked each other. It was hard to avoid it on hot afternoons, with the routine of sewing, endless sewing, before them, when all the world but the world of bees seemed still and quiet, and there were even no songs of birds, and no one passed by, and Christina was out, and Rolf, for a certainty, would not be coming round.

Helen stopped the machine to answer.

"What did you say?"

"Only," Bertha laughed, "that it looked funny."

Helen started to pedal again. "It would be funnier"—she raised her voice—"if I tried to use a machine with no cotton in it." She stopped pedalling. Reaching out for a new reel, she fitted it on, wetting the end of the thread between her lips; then, stooping attentively, she proceeded to thread the needle in silence.

"Yes," Mrs. Alfred's voice sounded below the back window, out on the sidewalk, "I dare say he would."

"He would," the bee-keeper repeated.

It was something they were agreed upon, but what, the two girls had no idea. Conversations had a way of coming up to them like this on fine days, with the windows open. They rarely troubled to piece them together. They knew all the subjects—for ever about the same things : the bees, the poultry, a pair of shoes for the rector who always trod down his

right heel, or for the squire who had a wonderfully even tread for a bow-legged man — a wonderfully even tread.

NOLAN had been telling his wife about the wasps in the apiary. This month the wasps were a positive nuisance to the bees. They were round about the hives in scores. Alfred told her he had never known them to be so persistent and venturesome.

She had come out to look at them.

He showed her one particular dead wasp outside a hive, where it had been rolled neck and crop by the bees. Stung to death.

"I shouldn't touch it," she cautioned him. "You know what wasps are. Tread on it, first."

"Tread on it!" He looked at her with benevolent reproof. Treading on every dead wasp would make a fine mess.

"See," she said to mollify him. "I'll pick it up." She doubled up the hem of her clean apron.

"Put it in the bowl there."

"I'm going to," said Sarah. Of course she was going to. For what else did he think she was picking it up? "I'm not going to make a pie of it," she said, with attenuated good will and the tolerance one must show for a man who could be tiresome. She dropped the wasp into the nearest trap, a bowl of sticky, syrupy stuff beside the hive. That brought it to life and it tried hard to crawl out, but couldn't.

"There, you see—it was alive after all," said Alfred.

"I could have told you that. Why," asked the vital, unimpassioned Sarah, "do you think I told you to make sure it was dead?" She looked up above, scanning the sky. "Isn't that a buzzard hawk overhead?" A furious commotion had begun in the fowl run. The hens had scuttled from one side to the other, and the chickens were imitating them — with not

enough sense, however, to gain proper cover. One of the cockerels crowed lustily, and its fellow answered it.

"Perhaps it was only a rat," said Alfred, to his wife, his eyes watering with looking up. He rubbed one eye with his finger.

"I shouldn't rub it," Sarah said, distracted from gazing at the sky by this behaviour. "Blow your nose."

He blew it, as lustily as the cockerel had crowed.

"You'll burst a blood vessel," Sarah warned him, her indomitable eyes again on the sky. And she cupped her strong thin hands to shade off the side light. "There——" the hawk had come into near view, after a drop of hundreds of feet. "I was sure there must be something," she declared.

"Of course there was something. It was bound to be something," Nolan conceded. "But I couldn't look up any longer." However, he was looking up now.

Black, dull, and poised so still in the air, the hawk held their attention—brilliant only in its eyes, which Sarah was sure she could see. Yet brilliant, too, in its constrained and sinister energy.

The fowls in the yard were paralysed into silence.

The hawk swooped to the water's edge, where the brook ran through the meadow—was lost for a second, then rose and soared away.

"Rolf would have been interested to see that," said the bee-keeper.

"He would," agreed Mrs. Alfred. This was the second thing in twenty minutes, about which she had been called upon to agree that Rolf would be interested. She realised that she had agreed in the very same two words. Resolved to go a step farther, she said: "That young man has some strange interests."

But this was not what she was getting at. She would come to her point in a minute.

Alfred gave his wife an inquisitive glance.

"What is there strange," he asked her, "in being interested in a buzzard hawk?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Or in my bees rolling out the wasps they have killed?"

"Nothing, nothing."

"Then I'd like to know what you are driving at."

Alfred's broad smile was a mixture of encouragement and challenge.

"Christy," she said. "Rolf and Christy."

"Is that strange? You wouldn't call his interest in Christy strange, surely?" His whiskers cocked outwards and up on his puckered cheeks.

They talked a little more, but to no end.

Nolan would have been shocked, or at least taken aback, if his wife had done what at this moment she was nearly inspired to do—throw her arms round his neck. That was how, years gone by, they had settled many a little problem. In each other's arms. But the inspiration, so quickly born, as suddenly died.

Sarah retreated up the garden path, tall and supple as a reed.

Alfred watched her go, intimately stirred as by the start of some memory—awakened by the rather long lines of her waist, and her compact hips. Even her grey hair had its harmonious downward and converging lines, where it formed a tight coil in her neck. Sometimes Sarah had a little rheumatism in one leg, but that was in winter. She was then inclined to limp.

He called out after her, kindly.



Could she spare him another basin or two ?

She said, turning, she had only her two best basins left. Would a couple of old jars do ?

He said they would.

"Better still," he sang out, "a couple of pudding dishes." Pudding dishes had low sides, and the wasps more easily floundered into them.

It was easy to trap wasps. They were so ready to blunder into these basins of prepared syrup, where they stickily drowned. The bolder wasps which ventured into the hives, lured by the scent of the honey, were soon bundled out. The bees leapt at them and stung them, dying in the fray from the loss of their stings. The other bees rolled out the dead, their own and the enemy, singly and in twos and threes . . .

\* \* \* \*

CHRISTINA, meanwhile, had gone out to meet Fred Dell.

She and Dell were to see each other at a spot some two miles away, near an old and broken stile at a turning off the Monks Walk.

This was a singular tryst, but she was eager to keep it. The appointment had been made a few evenings ago, when Dell had accompanied her up the hill, going to the assistance of Rolf. Dell then said he had a message for her, but would not tell her from whom.

At last, under pressure, in the few minutes available, he said : "'Tis from old Penny boy."

PENNY boy ! At that so oddly intimate reference to the monk, Christina had felt bound to hide her surprise. "I didn't know," she said to him, "you knew each other so well." And before she had time to check the impulse she inquired : "Why — is he coming out ?"

"Out ?"

"Out of the monastery. Is he giving up being a monk ?"  
Dell shook his head.

"Oh, no. 'Tis a life job he've taken on. For ever. He's too fond of it." And inventing a little more, with the same familiar air of knowledge : "He has a wonderful fondness for it."

Whereat Christina's heart, which had hardened against the monk, was touched to softness again.

"Did he tell you so ?"

Dell nodded and she asked him : "When ? Up in the churchyard ?" Dell had nodded again, and then, as if struck with suspicion, had taxed her as to what she knew about that. Christina's random reply was that she had guessed. Which appeared to displease him. Too many people had been guessing—about things that were his own concern, his and the old rector's. Of the rector he spoke with marked affection : the rector, he declared, was a fine old boy !

"Fred, I'm so glad he wasn't very cross."

"Cross ? You seem to know a good deal about it. One of these days"—Dell said darkly—"I'll do something wonderful." He had clenched his fists. "I'll pull this darned village down about its own ears. Like old Samson."

"Fred !"

Dell had laughed, striding up the hill beside her, his single stride equalling her two quick, breathless steps. She had described to him the spot where Rolf lay, and as it was still a little higher up this gave Dell time to explain that old Samson, next to David, was his favourite character in the Bible. And, perhaps, he added, Ben Adad—because Ben was always gathering all his hosts together and going out to war against somebody ; it didn't matter who. Ben was a proper wonder !

"David wrote the psalms, Fred."

"Yes," Dell said, grinning. "And David was fond of a pretty maid. The way that old boy died was a treat. How they brought him one maid after another," he went on, hazarding a quotation from the Scriptures—"so that he gat heat."

"Fred!" exclaimed the scandalised Christina.

"Well, 'tis true."

"Don't forget," the girl warned him, "that Samson died beneath the ruins of the temple. That should teach you to be careful."

"Maybe, my dear—but a few thatched roofs wouldn't hurt."

Dell had laughed, and then said what next he would like to do. This was to obtain the jawbone of the biggest ass he could find—the sexton's for preference—and chase every man-jack out of Barns . . .

At that point Christina had halted in the lane.

She had made a last desperate effort to extort from Dell a scrap more news.

"Do tell me, Fred! Do tell me."

"Why," he said compassionately, seeing her so agitated, "I will. I'll tell you the last bit. Ned sent you his blessing."

"No!" Christina, melting into tears, repeated: "No-o!"

Dell kept nodding his head.

"Then it was the two of you, after all, who dug the grave?"

Again Dell had nodded, smiling, allowing her to grasp so much. "He was my time-keeper," he said, boastfully. "He kept time for me."

His time-keeper! To Christina it had seemed like the reality, part of the truth even of her dreams.

Dell's last words before they had reached the place where Rolf was lying in the hedge were to impose secrecy. He would tell her the rest of the monk's message next time—in three days. He could not see her before. No, he couldn't.

No, he wouldn't. For some undivulged reason he was adamant. Their rendezvous near the Monks Walk was his own choice. He declared he wouldn't let her down. He swore he wouldn't let Penn down—because the monk had been such a good time-keeper. "We all," he had concluded, "won't let each other down . . ."

CHRISTINA approached the spot.

She had come by a footpath across the fields. She was humming a song as she climbed a stile—the last before the broken one, which for as long as she could remember had been broken down. Perhaps always. No; not always. It must have been new once.

Briefly she paused astride the stile, one foot on the step below—still humming the tune. Then she tried whistling it after the manner of Rolf, but could not set her mouth right. She could only form her lips into a round O, a budded, puckered O, through which she blew vainly.

How on earth did one whistle?

Perhaps her teeth were wrong. But they were even; as even as Rolf's. She tried setting her lips close together, but then could only hiss. So she stepped down and went on.

Dell received her in great spirits.

In selecting this spot he had been very considerate. He had chosen it for the very reason that the stile was in disrepair, so that if anyone should see them together here he could appear to be mending it. As for Christina—she was to have come upon him by chance while passing this way.

"Here you be!" he greeted her. "You've got here, then, after all? I saw you sitting on that stile there. I could see you through the hedge. I watched you. You looked a picture. You looked as if you were blowing bubbles without soap."

He had a hammer, a saw and a bag of nails, and he gave a great wallop with his hammer, driving the first nail into the nearly rotten old top bar, which he had already trimmed and was adjusting. He hammered away merrily, enjoying Christina's chatter, her compliments upon his skill ; retaliating with a stream of good humour.

"Climb that," he said at last.

He had thrown down the hammer, and stood back from the stile.

"Must I ?"

He said it would bring her luck. "First over the stile for luck."

She got over, boldly sitting still to test its strength with her weight, and as there was no step she slid down on the other side. Dell had remained stock-still where he was.

"Splendid !" she said. "A fine job, Fred," she commented, gazing at it ; and then steadfastly for a couple of seconds she looked at his lean fresh-coloured face. Even at his eyes she looked ; and she felt that in doing this she hadn't flinched. The stile was a good one, now, anyhow ; but Christina considered it was at its best separating them. Though, for that matter, he could climb it with those long legs in one stride.

His eyes were quite merry. Dell's eyes twinkled first at the stile, his handiwork, and then at her.

"I didn't tell you," he said, "to stay over on that side."

This she appeared not to notice, and his humour took a grimmer turn. He had picked up his saw.

"I'd like to nick it."

"Oh, Fred, why ever ?"

Christina advanced and placed her hand flat in the middle of the round top bar of the stile, as if in protection.

Dell said that he would do it if he could but hide the nick. He would cut it in half. 'Twould be a fine bit of fun to look

on from behind a hedge, while somebody came and climbed it—"See him go flop!"

Nevertheless, he had replaced his saw on the ground.

Acting under an impulse Christina decided to follow an arch stratagem. She was feeling more alarm than she had counted upon. She knew he meant to bargain with her for the monk's message. She must touch Fred Dell before he touched her. Be the first to touch him. If once he began to touch her of his own accord he would never agree to stop. Another minute, and he would be inviting her again to come back over the stile to his side. Her hand was still on the stile; she turned it palm upwards, holding it out for his.

"Give me your hand, young man. What kind of a fortune have you? Better let me read it for you, Fred."

She grasped his fingers firmly, bending them back to tighten out his palm, stooping over it. His hand felt hard in hers. It was well shaped, rather long, tough, smooth as leather and dry; he must have felt the softness of hers, which was for the moment enough. Mixed with this immediate pleasure was the rich satisfaction of the vain male abandoned to hear secrets told of himself—by a woman. With her other hand Christina took hold of his wrist. The fine twinkle had gone out of Dell's eyes. He was looking down at the girl with an expression of sheepish patience.

"Why, Fred, what a lot there is in this hand of yours. All kinds of wonderful things."

"Any maids?" His voice was quite husky.

"Plenty."

Dell felt more like himself again; and he said: "Go on. Tell me about them."

Christina, not wishing to appear too conventional a fortune-teller, described a girl with fair hair. Lovely fair hair.

"Long . . . or short?"

Christina took a chance. "Long," she said, studying his hand. "The girl I see here has very long, fair hair."

"I wouldn't say," interrupted Dell, "that it is so very long." He shook his head.

"And round, pretty shoulders, rather sloping shoulders," went on the bold fortune-teller, fitting her description to a girl of the village not previously in her mind. "In this particular quarter it appears," she said slowly, "as if there might be trouble; some kind of trouble. At any rate," she told Dell, "you are warned to be on your guard—to be wary."

Dell said he was always wary. He'd watch her.

Christina thought it policy to deny it would be the fair-haired girl who would cause the trouble.

"Who then?"

"I don't know. It isn't very clear." She smudged her thumb over the young carpenter's hand, near his thumb. But this appeared to make things no clearer. The mound of Venus was very tough, and to Christina illegible. Besides, she knew next to nothing about palm reading.

She came to a dark girl, and Dell, briefly nonchalant, asked: "Which one?"

"Why, Fred, are there several?"

"I ain't telling," he said solemnly.

Looking down at his hand again Christina said: "This one has long lashes." So much she knew of Dell's sweetheart by hearsay, and a little more. The 'little more' was that her figure was full and round, but neat; that her eyes and brows were even darker than her hair, and that she was altogether a passionate young creature whose friends were surprised when they heard that she was walking out with Fred Dell.

"Long lashes inclined to curl . . ."

"They curl a good deal, I may tell ye."

"So," said Christina, "do this girl's. Don't interrupt." And

she went on : "Fine eyes, full of intelligence, clear judgment and great gifts of love."

"H'm !"

"Why, 'h'm,' Fred ?"

Dell had shifted on his feet without moving his hand ; thinking, doubtless, of those great gifts of love.

"Oh !" cried Christina at last, suddenly. And she dropped his hand with a gesture, almost, of throwing it away.

"Why, what now ?"

"Oh !" She refused to tell him. But then at his urgent behest, was persuaded . . . "An awful pit ! Monstrous !" She said 'monstrous,' recollecting that Rolf had used the word in connection with something—she had forgotten what.

Dell looked at her across the stile, a little put out. He was still holding out his hand in the empty air.

He asked what sort of a pit ; she said she couldn't tell him ; she hadn't dared to look. But he shoved forward his hand over the stile.

"Oh, come on. Have another look."

He seemed hurt by her refusal, and still held out his hand like a peace-offering—or an invitation to a dance. He reminded her of some woeful fellow, painfully tall, red and crestfallen, who had been turned down by a girl at a dance in the village hall ; and taking pity on him Christina advanced a step and took his hand again, holding it by the tips of his sturdy fingers.

"I reckon," she said at length, in a mollifying tone, "'t isn't so bad after all. It isn't so dreadful as I thought. Nor so deep."

They agreed, after some discussion, that it was probably the grave in the churchyard. Dell examined his own hand, which she had released. He seemed perturbed, and looked at the other one, comparing them. Were they alike ? Did



they tell the same story? Christina was disinclined to agree, and said the left hand was always considered the plainest.

"'Tis wonderful," he said, and gazed at his left hand. "Like a map." Without lifting his head he raised his expressive eyes to regard the girl with whimsical doubt. . .

FRED DELL did not stint his account of the message the monk had sent to Christina. And when she knew all that he could remember, and still was curious, and taxed him again and again to confirm in the monk's own words what he had already told her, he searched his mind to its depths. There was nothing more.

"Isn't that enough?" he asked, in some disappointment.

"Yes," tardily she agreed. "Yes," she repeated. "It is good news that Ned is so happy."

Christina sighed and was silent, while Dell grew suddenly cheerful, exploding in fresh speech.

"Happy! Ned's happy all right. You should have seen him making cider pellets for those robins!"

This had to be explained, and the explanation made things worse. Christina was horrified. It sounded so unlike anything she could imagine Penn capable of doing.

"Fred! Do you really mean to say that his idea was to make those birds drunk?"

"Well, a bit merry. I won't say he wanted to get them absolutely tight. Not *soused*."

Involuntarily the girl laughed; but her eyes grew wet. They filled with tears.

"Nay, don't 'ee take on, now. Don't start cryin'. What's a cider pellet to a robin? Meat and drink."

Again Christina laughed, on the point of sobbing outright, and her companion foraged in his brain for something calculated to cheer her up.

"Oh yes. Fancy," he said. "Fancy forgetting that."

Her handkerchief to her eyes, weeping, Christina inquired : "Forgetting what ?"

"That rosemary bush."

She asked what about the rosemary bush.

"You've to dig it up."

"To dig it up ! Whatever for ?"

He answered that it was Penn's wish. The one thing Ned wished her to do. The chief thing. Until now this had slipped his memory, he explained ; and in a hurt voice, resolutely he went on : "Christy, how can you do one part of what he asked if you don't do the other ?"

She made him tell her again what the first part was.

"To forget 'im."

"But I don't want to forget him—at least not altogether. I want to be allowed to remember how kind he has been, and how grand to send me his blessing."

"Then dig up the bush."

She asked in what way that would help, and Dell replied in a flash : "Why, if you don't, he'll hear of it. He'll know you haven't forgotten him."

"Who will tell him ?"

"Nay."

"Who told him about it at all ? How does he know I've got it ?"

"Nay."

Christina began to weep copious tears. "Oh, how sad ! Oh, how sad !"

To this, too, Dell repeated his nay, and climbed over the stile. He bent and kissed her. She made, without feeling, her protest in a word and a sob. "Don't, Fred."

"My bonny maid. I be only kissing you better."

She said she didn't feel bonny, and was in no mood to

be kissed, continuing to plead with him. "Fred, Ned has proven his kindness to me. You be kind, too."

He laughed. "'Tis nothing, my beauty. Nothing at all." And withdrawing his left arm from its grasp of her waist, he held out the open palm before her eyes. "You didn't see another dark girl in that, I suppose? *You* weren't there?"

He had ceased to laugh and was flushed.

"No, Fred. I'm positive!"

"You will be, next time you look. As clear as in a looking-glass . . ."

## XXVIII

**B**ROTHER JOHN, in his heavy boots that weighed him down at his feet, in his robes and his great apron, which covered his stooping back and his front equally, moved across the monastery square like a considerable figure lost from a procession. Lost but still preserving, in his square and solid person, the dignity of that invisible company or parade.

Rolf followed in his wake.

The day was sunny, in early September.

With cumbersome but not dragging footsteps Brother John progressed, at his accustomed, short-legged gait. Indeed was he used to these heavy garments, which included also his formidable, folded cowl. And so thick a wrap for his neck was this cowl, and so rarely did he use his rather roughened but gentle voice, one could easily have imagined some urgent need, on his part, to protect his throat—lest his voice should depart altogether. There was also his large rosary that swung, or moved, by the side of his left leg with every step.

So far as Rolf could see, the rosary was suspended from a girdle beneath his apron.

Like a pageant of one, attended by a negligible satellite at whom no onlooker—if there had been any—was likely to look, or take into account at all, the good brother made his itinerary of the monastery with his visitor. His bald head shone. Those wrinkles at the sides of his eyes, and of his mouth, converging to their expressive points, were the marks of his composed interior humour. When he spoke, Rolf was touched by his benignity; and during his considerable

silences, which seemed to grow longer yet marked no constraint, not less was Rolf touched. Rolf, himself, was unable to find thoughts, much less words, to express his warmth, his respect and admiration for such evident kindness, venerability and peace.

The old monk continued to lead the way.

This task as guide had been assigned to him today by the prior. The father prior had authorised him to await a visitor at the gate, to admit and escort him.

Leaving the square behind they passed through a green and shaded alley. The alley was formed by tall hedges, shorn flat and straight as two walls. In the middle of the hedge on the right there was an arched opening, and through this Brother John disappeared. So suddenly did he vanish that Rolf, who had turned to gaze back at the sunlit gravel square, missed him.

However, Brother John was waiting for him inside the archway.

They were in a round flowered enclosure into which streamed the morning sun. What appeared to be an extension of one of the two hedges formed its high circular boundary. Brother John raised his eyes from the ground, though it was easier to look down at it. Brother John had, naturally, a wonderful gift of browsing; and the more he had browsed, the easier, with the passing years, had it become for him to watch the sweet earth, and all that happened there. He lifted his eyes to the level of Rolf's face, but did not look at it. Tranquilly he surveyed the asters in their varieties of colour and beauty, the blue delphiniums and the few young chrysanthemums there; and in particular, with extra benevolence, did he stare at one tall lupin, a solitary purple lupin—for this plant of very deep shade was growing in the middle of the sidewalk.

Brother John made a small gesture, a limited sweep of his hand—completing his survey—and spoke.

“A small garden,” he announced.

“It is,” Rolf agreed.

“Very still,” said the monk, who looked round the enclosure again ; while his guest, in perfect accord, said all that was required in the one word :

“Delightful !”

They moved round the sidewalk, approaching the purple lupin. It stood in spiky solitude, and now, at the end of its rooted tether and far out of its season, was reluctantly dying. Brother John touched it, smiling broadly. He addressed Rolf again. “It has no right here, this.”

“No ?”

The monk shook his old head, on his arched neck. “No. It has strayed here. Blown here from another garden.” He drew back to regard the lupin from another angle—as if it were some culprit. “I showed it to the prior. He hadn’t the heart to let me remove it.”

Rolf staunchly approved. “I should think not !”

Before leaving this spot Brother John, whose deepest active interest was the culture of plants, added the informative remark :

“From Carthage, I believe.”

“The lupin ?”

“Yes.”

“You mean originally ?”

“Yes, the parent plant. Centuries ago.”

“Ah !” said Rolf, illuminated. He had no wish to misunderstand his guide, who, he remembered, had only a moment ago told him that the lupin had blown there . . .

They travelled further.

This vast, vast hermitage ! It grew and grew. They

passed under its trees, along its avenues of silence, coming to the cloisters and skirting the chapel, whence there came the chanting of monks—though their voices sounded inexpressibly remote. The chanting ceased and there was silence everywhere, though not always solitude. In the orchard three monks were gathering fruit, and next, in what was the larger of two kitchen gardens, separated by a low wooden paling, two others were gathering vegetables and a third was digging. The digger had his back to his companions. He seemed very much by himself. Determinedly alone. Upon Rolf's arrival with Brother John he stood up, stretching his limbs. He regarded them distantly, with no expression of interest, then struck his boot on his spade, driving it into the excellent soil.

The two others had begun to pile vegetables on to an old-fashioned handcart: they might have been getting it ready for the market. It had short front legs like a hawker's barrow. A cauliflower fell from the top of the heap, rolling down. Each made a dash to recover it, on opposite sides of the barrow; but the vegetable, a very fine one, fell between the shafts to the ground before it could be reached.

But that was not all.

Exclamatory sounds had passed between the two monks. Vocal expressions of humour and surprise. Speech without words.

The one who picked the vegetable up examined it ruefully, the other watched him replace the white piece broken from its top. But there was still a gap in this handsome cauliflower. The second monk found the missing white knob under the cart. He handed it across. It had about an inch of stem. The other stuck it in the hole, carefully, as if he were mending a broken vase. He put the vegetable back on the cart. Then he glanced down at his apron. But he

was not looking at his apron, he was withdrawing his spirit from his companion who assumed a similar air of detachment. Their contract was at an end.

They wheeled the load away; one shoving, the other pulling.

"ANY minute," Rolf thought, walking in the opposite direction beside Brother John, "any minute I shall hear that younger fellow, the one in front of the cart, crying those cauliflowers for sale round the square. He will screw up his mouth and put his hand to the side of it, and yell like a hawker." He could not help but smile at this thought of so strange and unlikely an incident.

The cart, creaking, rumbled farther off.

*Cauliflowers! Fine cauliflowers!*

And the monks in all those windowless flat-fronted cells round that big square would come running out to examine the load of vegetables. *How much are cauliflowers today?*

Brother John himself suddenly smiled, then stopped smiling, as in words hardly audible, or meant to be heard, he said :

"Those wheels need greasing."

Rolf realised that he had not been addressed.

HALF an hour later he found himself left alone for a few minutes in a long corridor inside the monastery. On the right side all the way up were locked doors, with numbers on them, 17—18—19—and so on.

These were cells of particular seclusion.

By the numbers on the doors the cells were identifiable, and by nothing else; all were of the same plain pattern. But there was more to the numbers than this—a deeper relevance. Each number registered the identity of the monk



within, who had taken the most advanced vows. Each tenant, at this stage in his exalted endeavour to achieve spiritual purity, and bodily denial, was pledged to a solitary discipline of absolute silence, fasting, contemplation and prayer.

Opposite this row of doors were five or six large bays with broad central windows but blind sides. Warmth as well as light flowed in through the windows, which were wide open. Fresh air and the smell of earth and flowering shrubs flowed into the corridor.

Rolf sat by himself in the middle bay.

He was facing a door.

The door was number 18.

Brother John had told him this cell was unoccupied, and he had gone to fetch a key. Brother John had asked him to make no noise. Not to move about. On leaving him here he had put his finger to his lips. As silent as a contemplative monk Rolf sat, listening for any sound—for the smallest movement or betrayal of life inside any one of the row of cells.

There was none.

Then it happened—behind the door exactly opposite. High up and to the right of the door, on a level with the number, there was an oblong embrasure in the wall about a yard wide and a foot high. An empty ledge. Behind the ledge a row of five square panels. The panel on the left, the first in the row, was being moved. Some hand on the other side was sliding it back. From right to left the panel went away—revealing another on which there were large printed letters. D—A—E—then R, Rolf read each letter in turn as it was uncovered. And at last B.

The straightforward word was BREAD.

But the panel still moved, and before the word bread there were now the two letters NO.

## NO BREAD.

"He has no bread," Rolf thought. And he started up from his seat, looking up and down the corridor for someone whom he could tell of this need by the monk in his cell. Then there occurred the subsidiary thought: "Or does he mean that he doesn't want any bread? That he has enough for today?"

His eye went back to the ledge. Another panel had been moved.

This time it was the centre one. And now there was a second word, in the same large type—WATER.

"He wishes for water. Who, who is he? Christina's friar? My friend of that night on the seat in the dark? Whoever it is he is denying himself bread today."

Rolf heard the approach of his guide, whom he saw coming along from the far end of the corridor.

Brother John showed some surprise. He had been so sure this cell was empty. Well then, it must be the next one—on the right. And with a different key he opened the door of the neighbouring cell. They entered an interior porch and here, by turning to the right, they could have walked out into a small court or garden. But instead they advanced through another door, not locked, which the old man held open for Rolf, and they climbed a bare flight of stairs leading into a lime-washed room, lighted by a round window like a good-sized port-hole. The room was about half the size of the little porch they had passed at the bottom of the stairs.

A narrow iron bed stood against the wall, with its mattress and two folded blankets. There was also a straight-backed chair and a bare three-legged table.

Brother John said the absent monk was a distinguished scholar. A very able man. He always spent the morning at work in the library, engaged in translation. Then, at some

later date, he would print his work and also bind it. Brother John, raising his eyebrows, said appreciatively :

"He has made some of our most beautiful books."

Rolf looked through the round window into the private court. It was paved but had a bed of soil in the middle, where a plum tree, not very high but filled with scores of plums, thrived in the sunshine which appeared at this time of day to be already passing from its branches. Between the flags of the court several small rock plants grew; they had blue and purple flowers, and in one sunless corner there was a large fern. Near this a few rough stones and pebbles formed a miniature rockery, overflowing with small plants.

They went downstairs.

Rolf was the first to step into the court. He looked round it in silence. On the left was a trellised porch, or shelter, covered with a wild and untidy creeper. The man who made it must have wished to be still more, and even more secluded from the world, though the full sun shone into that solitary corner.

Rolf, standing beside Brother John, had not yet spoken.

"It has a seat," his guide began, regarding the porch in the corner with quaint approval. "He made it himself. He is quite a good carpenter," Brother John was going on, when there occurred a trifling movement, followed by a shuffle. Behind the trellis someone was getting to his feet.

The monk came out of his porch.

"Oh! Brother . . ." It was Rolf's guide who had spoken, without emphasis but in deep contrition. "God and the prior forgive me this trespass. And may you, too!" In a gesture of despair he covered his face with one hand.

But the other had chuckled.

Briefly he stood there, making that strange sound of a dumb man in an invincible good humour. For such scholarship and

accomplishments as had been attributed to him by Brother John he seemed very young, though Rolf himself had started with as much surprise to find anybody there at all. Rolf's gaze had never left him. And this look had been returned, though not with the same fixity. It was an intent but transient gaze and after passing to the dismayed old monk, it came back again charged with curiosity, and with definite inquiry.

Then the tall friar strode up to them, his hand outstretched, and Rolf, misled by his divided attention, put out his own hand. But the friar took hold of Brother John's wrist—exerting just enough force to wrest it away and uncover his face. He patted him on the back. His chuckles never ceased. Not quite like soft laughter, they expressed his indulgence, the tolerance of a man in strange circumstances, bound by oath not to speak, and who perceives that a profound error has been made. And they went beyond. They expressed his welcome.

He turned, took Rolf by the arm, led him to the plum tree, which they admired. Words were not needed. Such fine plums spoke for themselves. The friar picked one and ate it and made his guests do the same. Brother John joined them, and, at his host's invitation, ate one after another of the plums. It was a banquet ; in its good spirits, a festival. A rhapsody in silence !

Next, they had to look at the trellised porch.

The friar made Rolf try the wooden seat. There was room for two and he sat down beside him, musing and chuckling, while Brother John beamed and the sun shone full in their faces. . .

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AGAIN there were just the two of them—Rolf and his guide. They walked down the corridor together, Rolf all the time looking up at the set of panels beside each cell. Most of

them were blank. But of them one had on it the printed words THANK YOU. And as soon as they emerged into the open he inquired what it was that the thanks could be for.

"For whatever," Brother John answered, "the man inside the cell has been given." He shook his head; he could not say what that might be. And he asked of the ground upon which his eyes were now fixed again: "How could I make such a mistake?" And he added, again as one addressing himself: "It must have been number 28."

Rolf asked what must. "The empty cell?"

"Yes."

"But that was the number," Rolf, who had observed this, now told him, "where the panel said Thank You."

Brother John continued to shake his head. The whole thing baffled him. "At any rate," he said presently as they walked along, "that was not *his* cell. It wasn't up to this morning. Of that I am sure. He must have been transferred there." He crossed himself feebly, still bothered, racking his brains to disentangle the mixed situation.

"You mean," Rolf said, "that the monk we saw in that cell was not the scholar, not the one engaged on the translations? Not the one who, you said, was spending the day in the library?" And when Brother John nodded his agreement, he asked: "Who was he, then? I ask you, because I think I know him. Because," Rolf added, repeating himself: "I think he is someone I know. A friend."

But Brother John would not tell him the monk's name. "I may not tell you," he replied.

However, his words were not final.

They had reached a patch of green turf, and stood on its edge—a large square piece of ground with the grass left untended, growing wild.

Leaves had blown among the grass from the trees on its

border, and were strewn about drying, losing their sap, already turned to their autumn colours. Brother John's voice as he kept his eyes on the ground and resumed speech where he had left off, seemed to come from the depths of his chest :

"But if you would like to tell *me*," he said in his far-off voice—"I will listen." The voice and the guileless old man were two separate things . . .

A PAUSE had ensued.

It was not a long pause. It was a good deal briefer than many of the speechless intervals that had occurred before. For all Rolf knew Brother John may have been still remorseful over the heinousness of his crime, the outrage he had committed by intruding into that cell. Doubtless he was musing on it—though he looked as if he had fallen into an ordinary browse. He had admitted the friar's identity with a simple nod, repeated two or three times, and it was he, now, who brought this particular silence to an end, by saying, more briskly than he had spoken all the morning : "This is the burial ground."

This rough, undistinguished plot.

The fact had lain at the back of his mind ever since they had walked on to it. He announced it plainly. It explained itself. This was the monastery burial ground ; where the monks, when they died, were buried : where his own body, too, would eventually lie. What more need be said ? After all, he was not a chatterbox. Good man ! How he had talked today. More than he would ordinarily, in a month of Sundays—those days when his tongue was apt to be loosened by good beer.

But Rolf's ideas had received a jar.

Until Brother John spoke he had been back in imagination with the friar in the court of the little plum-tree. And he

was thinking : "We did not shake hands. We did not greet each other, or say good-bye. We didn't even speak ! We didn't even recognise each other. Or did we ? He would know me, because he had seen me before, that night, from his seat behind the tree, before it grew dark and he came towards me across the grass. But I had only his voice to go by. And he didn't say one word. Of course I had Christina's description. But perhaps he has changed. Yet I felt—I felt all the time——"

Rolf convinced himself that he had felt all the time it was his friend of the seat by the monastery gate.

"Especially," he was telling himself, at the very moment Brother John had spoken of the burial ground, "especially when he sat beside me again in that trellised porch. Those plums——!"

Rolf tapped the ground with one foot. In no way did it look like a cemetery—unless it was entirely unoccupied. And he asked in surprise : "Do you mean here ?"

"Yes."

"Where are the graves ?" But perhaps there weren't any, yet. Perhaps none of the monks had died.

Brother John, a little fatigued, refrained from smiling at such obtuseness ; and he replied that the graves were below. They were standing on them. Brother John was hungry. The void in his stomach had reminded him of the existence of the cauliflowers in the handcart. Those vegetables had been taken straight to the kitchen. And he was wondering, hopefully, whether there would be also a little beef for dinner today. What, indeed, was there wrong with this humble spot ? Nothing. Long ago he had thought—as others did when they first came to the monastery—that headstones, and flowers, and other tokens of memory should be provided to indicate each grave. But now he realised that it mattered only

to God where each monk lay. Moreover, as to that, the prior himself knew the whereabouts of all the dead. The father prior kept a plan, a complete chart of the burial ground—locked up in his desk.

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At the gate Brother John gave Rolf a piece of rosemary. Bending down to one of the largest of the shrubs he selected a substantial piece, which he presented, and he broke off a smaller sprig which he rubbed between his hands. Dusting his hands he remarked :

“Very fresh. It is very freshening!”

And regarding the other piece in his guest’s hand, without looking at his face :

“If you set it, it will thrive. It will thrive in almost any soil. It is a hardy plant. Very ! It will serve to remind you of your visit.”



## XXIX

ROLF'S visit to the monastery was an event for Christina, which she lived in the account that he gave her. She was left with as clear a picture as he. But while Rolf's impression was as something spread out—hers came to be narrowed, finally, to one single scene: Edward Penn at peace in his cell.

Above all, at peace.

Short of telling her that the friar was radiant, Rolf had described him as a man more reconciled with life than anyone he had ever met.

"I was overwhelmed by it," he told her. "It was beyond anything I could have imagined. Something, *something* had happened to him. I thought, when we were leaving, and he raised his hand, he was going to bless me. But he didn't do that. He patted me on the shoulder, patted us both on the back—chuckling all the time. Or most of the time. As if he realised what a good joke our accidental tumble into that cell had been. I felt I was being good-humouredly dismissed—for the rest of my life."

Christina herself trembled with appreciation.

"It is wonderful," she said.

She tried to resist the feeling that invaded her. Yet this, too, was a feeling of peace, combined with a sensation of freedom which she dared not accept as deserved. And then Rolf had suddenly said to her, calmly, with his convincing smile, patting her on the back: "So now you needn't grieve or worry any more. You can dismiss the whole thing."

So now she need not grieve or worry any more ! And he had patted her on the shoulder.

Looking back, during the hours that followed Rolf's story, Christina felt almost as effectively dismissed from his life by that pat on the shoulder as he, on his part, had felt when the friar had ushered him to the door of his cell. When Rolf resumed the topic with her, as again and again he did, he continued to refer more to the life of the monks as a whole than to the friar in particular. He talked a great deal of the panels outside the cells, and of the burial ground. When she asked his advice about the rosemary, he said she must certainly keep it.

"I don't suppose," he said, "the monk ever told Fred Dell you were to dig it up."

"Why do you think that?"

"Only," he replied, casually, "because I have never known anybody tell a thing second-hand as it was given first-hand. For example, I don't believe that part of his story about the churchyard robins. I've seen those robins," Rolf said, "I've had a good look at them—and——"

"And they don't look like drunkards," Christina finished with a laugh, taking the words out of his mouth.

"No ! And Friar Hugh wasn't the sort to do anything of the kind Dell told you he did. Not unless he had gone temporarily cracked. To me, he looked anything but cracked." Rolf heaved a deep breath and proceeded : "He seemed as if he had got somewhere. He had reached some state of contentment—if only for the time being . . . No ; Dell must be a liar. Christy, I should never dream of digging up the rosemary. It would be sacrilege. It is a delightful token. Indeed," Rolf still went on, pursuing his own track of thought, "indeed, if I thought you were really going to dig it up I would like it myself."

So Christina had promised to keep it.

"For ever?" Rolf challenged her.

"For ever!" she said, with conviction, as well as to satisfy him.

Oh yes! She would keep the rosemary growing for ever in her garden in memory of Edward Penn; or for no other reason than to oblige Rolf. This she told herself, shedding tears by herself in bed—where she had no longer any fear of a visit from Penn even in her dreams. And no hope of Rolf either. . . .

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DURING the week that Rolf was to leave Barns, they met more rarely than at any time during the past seven months. Rolf was going up to the allotment regularly, trying to make up for his neglect of old Mr. Nolan by working all the harder now in the few remaining days.

Then he met Christina again, one evening.

They skirted the fields and came to their old secluded gate, from which she had tried to carry him home. When they reached the spot Christina felt unwilling, once more, that he should kiss her. Nevertheless, he kissed her; and though she did not protest she made no response.

"You know, Christy," he said in his enlightened manner, "I think one should kiss oftener."

"Who should?" she asked.

"Everybody! I think it is a good thing. At any rate, not to have someone to kiss—once in a way—is certainly bad. I'm sure."

"Is that what you learned up at the monastery?" she asked; and it seemed that her wry smile was lost on him, for his responsive laugh had a ring of absent musing.

"You are sure," he said at length, "you are not going to fret

about anything? You are not going to start missing me—overmuch? Of course we are bound to miss each other a good deal. I shall never forget this splendid friendship. It has been wonderful!”

“Wonderful,” she acknowledged.

“You don’t seem thrilled about it, Christy.”

“I am, Rolf,” she said, but so calmly that he laughed; and she made the explanation: “Somehow, I don’t feel like laughing.”

“Neither do I,” he admitted.

All the same, she had noticed that for some days he had been living in a mood of exaltation; in a kind of soaring mood. And she remembered what he had said about Penn. How the monk appeared to have reached somewhere. Somewhere in spirit. Rolf himself seemed to have reached somewhere. But she had no idea where.

“You must be looking forward to going home,” Christina said to him, tentatively.

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“But you must be, Rolf, after all this time.”

“No. I am not looking forward to going home in particular. I have been so very much at home here.”

“Perhaps,” she suggested, “you are looking forward to your trip to the equator.”

This made him laugh.

“Oh-h! I don’t know whether anything like that can ever happen. That was only an idea.”

“You have a good many ideas,” said Christina, softly; and as she saw him wince at this, and heard his short laugh, she felt she could throw her arms round him. But he drew himself up and flung up his own arms above his head.

“I feel so well, Christy.” He regarded her admiringly.

“It is the kisses,” she said lightly.

"Perhaps!" And he kissed her again, without any response on her side.

"You will need someone else to kiss," she said, more brightly.

"Oh!"

"But you cannot do without something that is so good for you."

Rolf gave his short laugh. "Oh!" he said again. "I wasn't applying my theory directly to myself." He said he had been speaking in general, and went on: "After all, it seems to me that man is a caressing animal."

"Animal?"

He regarded her somewhat shocked face, and kissed it, doubtless in proof of his general theory. "Creature, then, if you don't like 'animal,'" he substituted, joking her, and resumed: "At my age, at our age, marriage is some way off. We don't want to be fathers and mothers, yet." And Rolf added parenthetically: "It wouldn't be good for the children. Nor for us. And I suppose marriage is a caressing affair, after all. Though I haven't thought about that side of it—much."

"Neither have I," equally lied Christina.

"I used to feel, Christy, that love itself was something wildly and beautifully different. Not physical at all. A gift of the spirit. A state in which one blissfully gave of one's whole soul. The whole duty of man"—said Rolf, plunging to the depths of his younger faith—"was to bless one's love and adore her!"

WHEN they set out to go home it was quite dark, and a good many kisses had been exchanged. Rolf felt magnificent. He could not help feeling magnificent. He told himself so. But he also felt touched—at the thought of his impending departure from Christina, to whom he kept on giving advice. She was to start life afresh! All over again, as he meant to do.

Alone in her bed, in the dark, Christina looked back on his words :

"Oh, how I am looking forward to life !"

He had quoted a line from a poem by George Meredith : *The rapture of the forward view*. She had thought it beautiful.

And then something else written by an American named Thoreau : *If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost. That is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.*

And again, from the same American, something about a person following his genius wherever it should lead him. *Genius* meaning, Rolf had been careful to explain, one's own spirit or guiding star. If a man followed his genius thus faithfully, he would, according to the profoundly wise Thoreau, be likely to meet with triumphs unexpected in his common, or ordinary hours.

Rolf told her he had been thinking about these things for some time — while his ankle was getting better.

Which, Christina thought, was splendid.

Nevertheless she could not help secretly feeling a little bitter toward Thoreau for putting such ideas into Rolf's head. It was this unheard-of American, no doubt, who had given him the unsettling idea of going off to the equator.

Diffidently, ashamed not to know, she had asked him : "Who is Thoreau ?"

"He's dead now," said Rolf, and he had added with the same nonchalant air : "He was, for some time, Emerson's gardener. I believe he did the job for nothing, but I'm not sure. I dare say he did it to kill time, or just to do something useful. Or, perhaps, simply to be in the company of Emerson."

Christina had heard of Emerson ; but why Rolf should pay any attention to the idea of his gardener, or for that matter anyone else's gardener, was something, in her present rather

forlorn frame of mind, baffling. Then to complete her bewilderment Rolf had dropped the wildest thought of all : "I wouldn't have minded being Emerson's gardener myself . . ."

Well, her Uncle Peter ought to have heard that — her uncle, who had some amusing ideas of Rolf as a gardener, which he rarely expressed in anything but a wink and a knowing smile.

The weather continued to be beautiful.

Everybody said this was the most perfect week of the year. The dry days were not too hot, while each night produced a heavy dew that was almost tepid, though there was no lack of air.

Peter Nolan, market gardener, who was very pleased with the progress of his work in the allotment, called in one morning at the house of his brother, the bee-keeper, on his way down home. He was alone ; Rolf was at home, packing. Bertha and her young mistress were up in the sewing-room. Helen, the elder girl, was away. And at the end of a long spell at her sewing-machine Bertha said :

"I believe, Miss Christina, Mr. Nolan is below. I heard his footsteps outside there."

Christina ran to the window.

"Why, good morning, Uncle Peter. What a wonderful day it is ! Are you by yourself there ? Wherever can everybody be ?"

She ran downstairs on to the paved sidewalk, thimble on her finger, with a needle and a piece of dress stuff. They talked, while she sewed in the sun, glancing up from her work, joking him.

"You are going to miss your assistant, I reckon, Uncle Peter." Christina said this before he could tell her *she* was going to do any missing.

He agreed in his slow, kind way. "I reckon so. We are, I reckon."

“‘We?’ He isn’t my assistant, Uncle Peter. Surely you aren’t going to say Rolf is any assistant of mine. He may be all very well as a gardener, but he’s no dressmaker. Not to *my* knowledge.” Her needle came unthreaded, and she wetted the thread, turning away from the sun.

Nolan gave a chew at his plug of tobacco, turning it over in his cheek; he wanted to spit, but refrained. “You’ve had him, I reckon, as much as I have—at least, somebody has, down here, I should say,” he replied to her with a laugh against himself. “He took better to bee-keeping than to hoeing ‘taties. Though he had shaped wonderful—back in the early summer.”

Christina’s laugh in return gave the merriest tone to her answer.

“Why, Uncle Peter, I’ve seen him time after time, all through the summer, going up and down with you and that old wheelbarrow. You must have got through a rare lot of work together in the allotment. But I do know,” she added, as if revealing something not widely known,” the odd times he’s been here in the apiary, father’s been *awful* glad to have him. . . . Uncle Peter, I do wish I could spit like you!” Nolan had, without effort, spat far over his shoulder into the shrubbery. “Your aim is so good,” said Christina. “Now, if I had tried to do that I should have spat right on to one of those bushes. I’ve tried it, and that’s what happened.”

Nolan turned to go home, laughing.

And presently, in the sewing-room, Bertha, a faint flush on her cheeks, a piece of blond hair across her lowered face, said in her most soothing, gentle voice :

“I suppose, Miss Christina, he will be visiting Barns again?” Christina laughed.

“You suppose who will be visiting Barns again?”

“Why, I do beg your pardon, Miss Christy, but I couldn’t



help hearing who you were talking about below the window a few minutes ago."

"Oh! Why, to be sure he will! Some day. He'd be a rare sort to forget us all in such a hurry."

They sewed for some minutes in silence, and at length Bertha made the observation :

"That's what *I* thought. *I* should like to see him again." She swung back the stray piece of hair, fair as a handful of flax.

\* \* \* \*

AGAIN that shade of ruefulness in Rolf's face, and in his voice, with a humorous knitting of his brows. Christina begged him not to tumble, not to fall again off the gate and this time, perhaps, break his neck. Because she had worked hard all day—and she couldn't possibly carry him home.

The girl put both hands on her loins, as if gingerly feeling them.

"You've no idea," she declared, "how your knees gripped me. There were real black marks over my hips—for weeks."

"Never!"

She nodded. "Awful ones! If mother had seen them! Your legs were like iron."

She let him feel at her waist, which he squeezed gently with his hands, here and there, as if finding the place where his legs had hurt her. Then he put both arms round her and said abruptly : "What I meant, Christy, the other night, when I said that kisses were good for one—were those that are given without too much earnestness. Even so, I didn't mean insincere kisses."

Christina, without replying, pondered the abstruse problem of the kiss that lacked earnestness, and is yet sincere.

"I meant," Rolf added, "the kisses that are given without pain."

The only kisses occurring to the mind of Christina, that might be given in pain—and she tried hard to think of any others—were those given by injured or dying people to their weeping relatives.

“Given, I mean,” Rolf became more explicit, “without a pain in the heart. In moments,” he pursued, beginning to laugh at what he knew he was going to say—“of colossal love.”

Christina’s own knowledge of colossal love was negligible. She had never considered it even in the abstract—neither the cruelty of suppressed love, nor the stormy nearness to grief of love rampant. But she had already her own hidden pain at her heart. Smiling at Rolf’s last phrase, “I’m afraid,” she said, resorting to her sense of the comical: “I don’t know much about *colossal* love.”

“Well then,” Rolf said to her, in the voice and manner of one who feels the whole edifice of an idea to be on the verge of collapse—“the kisses I’m talking about are those given with pleasure. Comfortable kisses. Like these——”

She let him show her what he meant.

“Between people,” he went on, “who love each other but”—letting go her flushed face to complete his sentence—“but who are not lovers.”

Christina felt proud that she had managed to repress her inward start; that she had not shown, even by any flicker in her eyes, the slightest sign of emotion, while he had defined that subtle, and to her incomprehensible difference.

\* \* \* \*

ROLF spent the last night before his departure at the “Bull Inn.” This arrangement was the best that could be made to suit his early morning train. He arrived at the inn some time after the bar had been closed, when the only visible life about the place was in the person of the boots, who did duty as porter,

and wore a gigantic cap ; and who, having bolted the door, showed him to his room with the promise to call him at dawn. There was still some movement in the inn at this late hour ; there were sounds, female voices, some laughter, the not very quiet shutting of doors—the discarding of a boot on the floor of a neighbouring bedroom. Annie the barmaid, Zaida the kitchenmaid, and also—Rolf presumed—Polly must have gone to bed by this time. And he, too, was very soon falling asleep.

In these final moments before actual sleep the events of his parting from Christina came back to him. They had said good-bye at her home, in the presence of others. Formally they had kissed each other, as if it were the first time. Then Christina had fussed round the buggy trap outside, in which Mrs. Denby's considerate and herculean David—loaned by his wife for the purpose—was to drive Rolf into Alderlow.

Christina kept out of the light thrown by the trap headlights ; but she had sounded, in the dark, gay enough.

“Don't forget your rosemary !”

It was the last thing, in its small plant pot, she handed up to him in the trap. In fact, he couldn't recall anything else said by her after that except : “Don't oversleep in the morning,” her laughter in the darkness, and the final : “Good-bye !” —prolonged as if she were singing it. His immediate sensation, as the pony's brisk hooves struck the hard surface of the dark lane, was of relief ; his thoughts were of the incidents that lay ahead. Now, in bed, as reflection and fancy died, he could have wept. And perhaps he did. But in what seemed the next moment, the porter who had only just now bidden him good night was again at the bedroom door.

“What can he want now ?” Rolf wondered sleepily.

The porter wanted him to get up.

Daylight was breaking.

Rolf rose with a feeling of rapture—the rapture, doubtless, of his forward view. Hot coffee, brown bread and butter and an egg, prepared by the porter, vanished down his throat. It was a very beautiful morning. He felt that the porter, who accompanied him on foot to the station, was his friend. This young fellow was wearing the same immense cap, which Rolf realised respectfully, and with humility, he himself could never have worn with that air of abandon.

The train was in the station.

It was puffing, Rolf reflected, with amused self-importance—for so little a train. This was only a branch line. His luggage was bundled in; last of all, and more carefully, the plant pot.

“That’s a rare little plant!” the porter said, regarding it from the carriage window, on the seat. “A rare one!”

“Rosemary,” Rolf informed him.

“So I reckoned. I thought ’twas, soon as I saw it. ’Twill make a rare shrub if you set ’un.”

Together, by the door, they stared at the rosemary.

“I got it from the monastery.”

“Ay? From the monastery? Well, now. ’Tis a right little thing.”

Rolf changed the subject.

He asked the porter suddenly: “How’s Polly?”

Of course this porter would know Polly.

“Who?”

“Polly—the chamber-maid. That bright, very obliging girl.”

“Why, I reckon—” said the porter, thoughtfully, and removed his cap, which he examined and put back on his head at, Rolf noticed, the very same angle. Obviously, his thinking cap. But why on earth need he have to think so hard to recall

the existence and well-being of Polly? "I reckon," he repeated, "she'm all right. Better where she is, I reckon. For," he added, "a while or so."

"Has she gone?"

"She *has* gone. But not fur. No further than home, I reckon. 'Tain't for me to say, but they *do* reckon, why, and they admitted as much, or as good *as*—the pair of them. Polly said no 'twasn't, in the first place. And he said 'twas someone else. Then they both said 'twas. And now they'm all waiting to see. But I do know—because the engine driver of this very train told me—that the lad got an awful good hiding from his father. What his father said," the porter pursued in his slow speech as the train jerked forward and Rolf jumped in, "was that 'e'd teach his own lad, or anyone else, a proper lesson—for making him," he raised his voice to a shout—"a grandfather before his legal time——"

ROLF waved to the porter and looked up at the sky, where the dawn star was sparkling with a fresh, beguiling brilliance.

THE END















